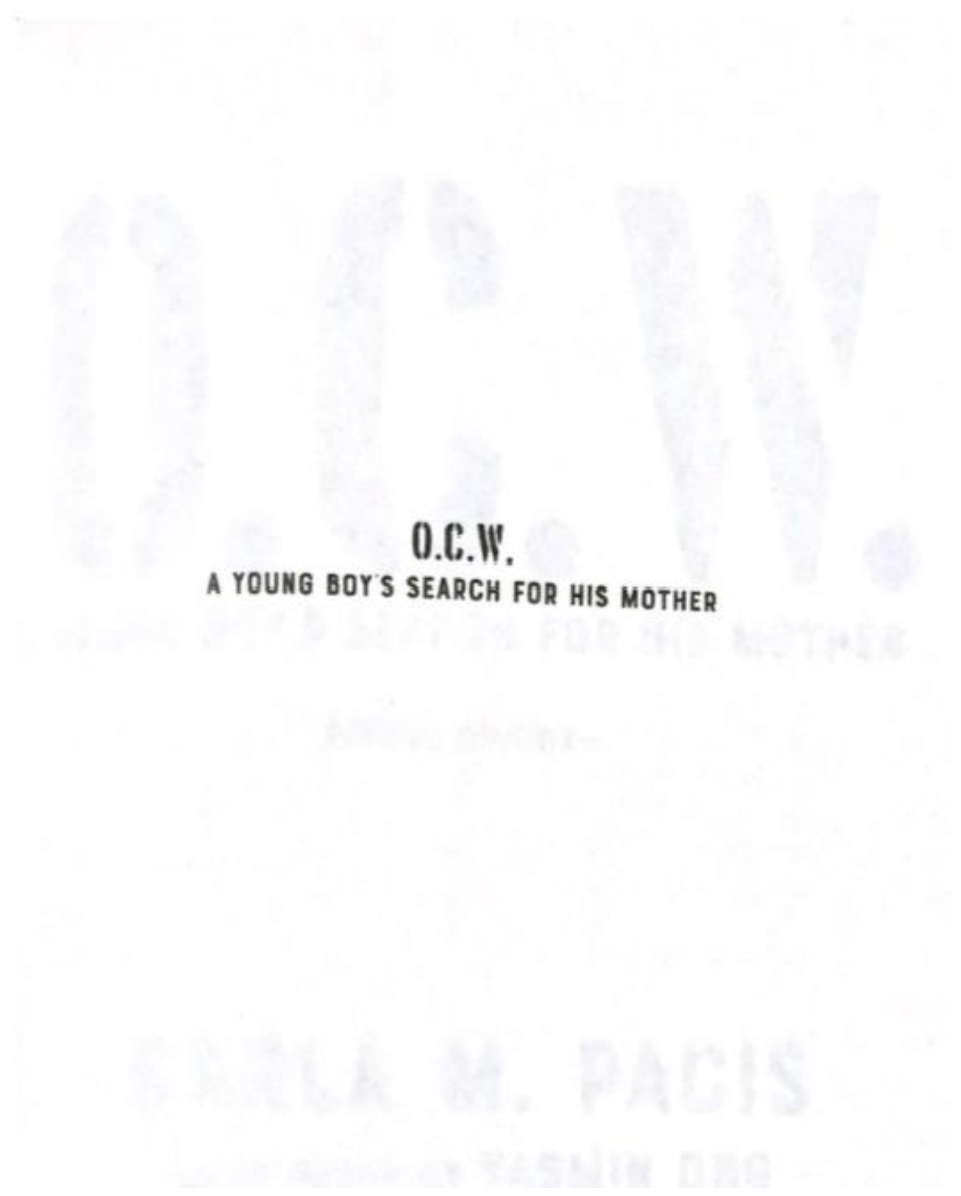




O.C.W.

A YOUNG BOY'S SEARCH FOR HIS MOTHER

ERLA M. PACIS

ILLUSTRATED BY YASMIN DRG

O.C.W.

A YOUNG BOY'S SEARCH FOR HIS MOTHER

—REVISED EDITION—

CARLA M. PACIS

ILLUSTRATED BY YASMIN ONG


ANVIL
TEENS

O.C.W. A Young Boy's Search for His Mother
ni Carla M. Pacis

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Carla M. Pacis

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*For my brother Robbie and his son, Martin,
who, I pray, will one day
forge a wonderful relationship
... and to all Filipino OCW's all over the world.*

CHAPTER 13	
ATE LORNA	114
CHAPTER 14	
THE SEARCH IS ON	122
CHAPTER 15	
FOUND	141
CHAPTER 16	
DILEMMA	150
CHAPTER 17	
HOME	169
AUTHOR'S NOTE	177
TEACHERS' GUIDE	178

CHAPTER 1



NANAY'S PLANS

She had packed the night before and was ready to go. Most of what she needed to bring was packed in one suitcase borrowed from Aling Teresa, who was too old to have any more use for it. Outside, Sirius the Dog Star still shone over the village of Lauan, but already many were starting their day. Lolo Carding, Nanay's father, was preparing his breakfast as he was coming along to the pier. Aling Siony was readying the slop for her many pigs. Mang Ador had just gotten out of bed and was doing his daily stretches in front of his house before going out to plow his field. Nanang Maria was packing her basket of food for the long trip to Manila to visit her son. She too was going down to the city with them. Nanay would be staying with her in Manila for one night before taking the airplane to Hong Kong. Tatay had put the pot of water over the glowing coals and tossed

some hard *pan de sal* on the grill. He had promised everyone that they could take Nanay to the pier in Culasi where she would take the boat to Manila. From there she would take an airplane to far off Hong Kong. No one in their family had ridden an airplane before and only Nanay knew where Hong Kong was.

Nanay had announced her plans to work in Hong Kong over dinner that included Lolo Carding. She was so excited, she didn't notice Tonyo's black eye, another trophy from another fight over the scores of a basketball game. Tonyo knew the scorer was rooting for the opposing team and discovered that he had been adding points to their losing score. They at first tried to settle it amicably, but he lost his temper and cuffed the guy on the ear. That was enough to cause a melee and Tonyo ended up with a black eye. Lolo Carding noticed and chided Tonyo with a, "Lost your temper again, *ano?*"

Tonyo knew that Hong Kong was in the southernmost tip of China, where lots of Chinese and other foreigners lived. Although it was in China, it was not really Chinese. It belonged to England, another country much farther away. There, Nanay said, she could earn a lot of money working as a maid for any one of the very rich people. "Remember Lani, Aling Teresa's daughter?" she asked Tonyo. "She's here for a visit

and she brought her mother a TV set, a colored one at that." And the only one in Lauan, thought Tonyo. He remembered Lani. She had also fattened out quite a bit and wore snazzy clothes, like the bright green dress she wore to the *fiesta* that included matching bright green shoes. Amazingly, she could also speak a little English. Nanay continued, "She also sends her mother a good sum of money every month — enough to enroll her two younger brothers in school. With the money I could make in Hong Kong, I could send all of you to school and maybe even college. I could buy Tatay a jeep just like Mang Ador's or maybe buy a piece of land that Tatay could till to grow rice."

Nanay went to speak to Lani as soon as she could. She learned that while Lani was working as a salesgirl in Manila, a well-dressed woman with gold hoop earrings that hung almost to her shoulder had approached her and asked her if she wanted to work in Hong Kong as a salesgirl. Lani had agreed and before she knew it, she was in Hong Kong. But instead of a job as a salesgirl, she found herself working for a Chinese couple as a maid. Lani said it wasn't so bad. It had been difficult in the beginning. She was quite disappointed at not getting the promised job. But the couple was rich and paid her very well, certainly much more than what she earned as a

salesgirl in Manila or what Nanay was earning as a schoolteacher in their village that had acquired electricity only last year. She had her own room, her own television and days off on Sundays. They even paid for her trip home. And there were more of these people looking for Filipino maids.

Lani had given Nanay the name of the well-dressed lady in Manila. Nanay spent one month's salary and money from the sale of one piglet to go to Manila to see her. She was as Lani had described her although she forgot to mention her perfume that made Nanay dizzy. Thank goodness Madam Recruiter allowed her to sleep at her house for one night as Nanay did not know anyone in Manila. Madam Recruiter had sent Nanay home right away and told her to wait for her telegram. She would make all the necessary arrangements and if she got a job, she would pay her with the proceeds from the sale of a small piece of land Lola Maring left Nanay before she died. Tatay was not happy with this arrangement, but he had no choice.

By the time the rains had come, Madam Recruiter had cabled Nanay that she had work in Hong Kong — as a maid to a rich Chinese couple with no children. She had one month to prepare. Throughout that whole month, although she had much to do, Nanay walked with a different gait. Her strides were longer and determined. Her

NANAY'S PLANS

brows often met above her nose and she sometimes bit her lips until they bled, but her eyes sparkled like they never had before.

And now, Nanay was ready to go. Tatay, Nanay, Tonyo, Melody, Ryan and Neneng silently drank the dark brown, sandy coffee and ate the hard *pan de sal* from yesterday that were, at least, warm. No one had thought of buying fresh buns. They were all much too sleepy to care and too sad to say much anyway. After the meager breakfast, they all quickly piled into the jeep Tatay had borrowed from Mang Ador. Tatay's tricycle with their family name P-E-R-A-L-T-A spelled in neon-green letters at the back, was certainly much too small for everyone to fit into and the journey to the city would take about two hours. Lolo Carding sat in front with Tatay while everyone else sat in the back. The children crowded around Nanay. They would all miss her, especially Ryan who was only five and Neneng who was three. They were still too young to be without a mother. But Nanay tried not to be sad and promised she would send them toys and clothes as soon as she could.

CHAPTER 2



NANAY LEAVES

By the time they arrived at the pier, the sun had come up an hour ago. Already, there was so much activity. Trucks filled with cattle, sacks of rice or sugar rumbled by. People were dashing about like ants that had been disturbed — yelling, selling food, carrying or loading cargo or simply waiting to board the different boats that lined the pier, that included *bancas*, trawlers and cargo ships. Most of the vessels were in a state of disrepair, listing heavily to one side or another. One particularly, had its own berth and floated majestically as it waited to be filled with passengers and cargo. Tonyo read the ship's name, *MV Doña Corazon*. This was the boat his mother was taking to Manila.

Everyone got off the jeep and accompanied Nanay all the way inside the ship. This was the first time any of them had been inside such a large sea

NANAY LEAVES

vessel. Tonyo wanted so much to run around and explore, but he knew he had to stay with Nanay and the rest of the family. This would be the last time they would see her for a long time. It was five years before Lani managed to come home and see her family.

Nanay held Neneng in her arms while she gave last minute instructions to Tatay. "Make sure the children go to school everyday. Whatever happens, keep them in school. Take them to see Lolo Carding every Sunday. Bring the white sow to Mang Berting next month, he has a new boar. Remember to pay Aling Siony as soon as you can for the pork we ate last night." Tatay only nodded sullenly at each request. Then she turned to Tonyo and said, "Don't forget to feed the pigs, especially the small ones. You can sell the rest of them to Aling Siony for at least P500.00 each. Keep the runt if you like." At this last one, Tonyo smiled. He had taken a special liking to the runt. Poor little one was always hungry. By the time it got to its mother's teats, all the other piglets had sucked her dry, after which she would roll over on her tummy and sleep. No amount of nips or nudging from the smallest pig could make her turn around. Tonyo would take some of Neneng's milk and feed the runt. Now, it was eating *camote* from Tonyo's hand. "Be sure to keep up your good grades. You could easily make class valedictorian. Look after

your brother and sisters and be patient with them," was Nanay's last request to Tonyo.

Too soon, the ship's horn gave a warning blast. It was going to leave in a few minutes and everyone who was not a passenger had to leave the ship. Nanay gave everyone long tight hugs. She held back her tears but let them go when her family finally turned to go and Neneng began to cry. Through her sobs, she said, "I'll be home before you know it. I'll send money every month. I love you all."

The whole family stood by the pier waving at Nanay who stood on the deck with Nanang Maria and the other passengers. They stood there until the boat was out of sight. With heads bent, they piled back into the jeep. Only the muffled sobs of Neneng and Ryan could be heard above the roar of the engine.

It wasn't easy without Nanay. Tonyo had to take over most of her chores, like cleaning and washing, aside from his own, which included working the rice fields. Melody cooked the rice when they had some and took care of Ryan and Neneng. She was also the only one who continued to go to school. Tonyo tried for a few months, but eventually had to stop, as the chores took up all his time. Madam Letty, the school principal and Nanay's best friend, had passed by their house to

speak to Tonyo about going back to school. Of all the students, she thought Tonyo had the most promise, especially now that his mother might be able to earn enough money to send him to college in a few years. But Tonyo had to finish high school first and now, he had dropped out. Madam Letty knew that Tonyo wouldn't have left school if he didn't have to. She would have to speak to Tonyo's father and that was not going to be easy.

"If that's what the boy wants, let it be," was all Tatay had to say.

"But that is not what he wants," argued Madam, "he wants to stay in school but he cannot as he has all these chores at home."

Tatay gave Madam a look that froze her. From then on, she never spoke to Tatay again. But she didn't give up. She went to see Lolo Carding. He agreed that Tonyo should continue in school. He promised Madam he would see what he could do.

As he had promised, Lolo Carding broached the subject of Tonyo's going back to school to Tatay. In answer he bellowed, "Then you come and do his chores! I'm tired of people telling me what I should do with my children! And I'm tired of working your rice field for you!" He stomped out of the hut. Tonyo, who had heard it all from the pigpen behind the house, put his arm around his grandfather's shoulders when he came to give

Tonyo the news. "It's okay Lolo, maybe in a few months I can go back to school." But inside, Tonyo was beginning to boil.

By Christmas, the family had become used to being without Nanay. As she promised, she had sent them money every month and for the holidays, she had been able to send them gifts through a friend of Lani's from the next village who had been allowed to come home.

"Wow!" Ryan yelled when he saw the shiny robot with eyes of gold nestled in the box. "He can move his arms and legs! And his head turns all the way around!" Neneng hugged the blonde-haired, blue-eyed baby doll to her chest. It came with a bottle of milk that slowly disappeared when she tipped it into the doll's mouth and appeared again when she set it straight. She was hoping for the Barbie doll she saw in the store in the city but this one was just as pretty. Melody received a pretty dress of the palest blue with almost invisible tiny white flowers embossed on it. In addition, it had the daintiest lace on the sleeves and on the hem. Nanay specifically said this was for her graduation. Tonyo liked the nifty red knapsack with six pockets she sent him. It was big enough to hold most everything he needed but small enough to carry everywhere. Tatay and Lolo Carding each

NANAY LEAVES

received a nice shirt. Tatay's was sporty and had horses printed all over it — perfect for the cockpit — while Lolo Carding's was long-sleeved and very formal — perfect for church and town meetings. It looked like they were going to have a pleasant Christmas even without Nanay. But not all was well with the family.

CHAPTER 3



ALL IS NOT WELL

Nanay had not been gone for more than three months when Tatay began to come home long after his tricycle rounds were over. Eventually, he hardly took his tricycle out to pick up passengers, spending most of his time in the village cockpit and then at the beer garden drinking the night away. Most nights he would come home very drunk. He tried not to wake the children but he stumbled all over the place and cursed so loudly that the two little ones would wake up and begin to cry from fright. He would shush them back to sleep and curl up in his corner of the mat with all his clothes on and fall into a deep drunken sleep that would last till noon. Tonyo listened from his corner of the hut. He tucked his fists between his legs for fear he would use them against his father. Wasn't it bad enough that Lolo Carding had to hire Mang Ador's son to

ALL IS NOT WELL

work the rice fields for him as Tonyo couldn't do it all by himself? But he still gave the one sack of rice that was part of his deal with Tatay, otherwise he and the children would hardly have anything to eat.

By Christmas, things got worse. Tatay would come home not only drunk but also very angry. He would throw and break things around the house. He would scream for Nanay and curse her for leaving them. When Tonyo tried to stop him from breaking more things, he would push Tonyo roughly away. Tonyo held his temper but it was close to boiling point. There were many days when there was nothing to eat at home, except rice. Tatay even forgot to send the sow to Mang Berting. It was Tonyo who brought the large fat pig to breed. With the help of Lolo Carding, Melody and Ryan, Tonyo managed to lift the massive sow onto the tricycle. Just when they thought it was tightly tucked into the cab; it gave a loud squeal and lurched from the vehicle. It toppled over onto poor Ryan and the tricycle keeled over. Only the air was squeezed from Ryan's lungs and no one was hurt. Between lots of laughter, they managed to heave the pig into the tricycle again, which Tonyo drove to Mang Berting's farm. Tatay was completely oblivious to what was going on below his window. His alcohol-induced dreams had him captured.

Many were the days and nights Tonyo, Melody, Ryan and Neneng spent at Lolo Carding's hut. He liked having them around and with his small pension and the little money he earned from the rice, he could feed the children and keep them away from their father's rage. But soon, Lolo Carding too had difficulty feeding four more mouths.

He went to Tatay to try to talk some sense into him. Instead, he received a punch in the mouth. Luckily, Tatay was so drunk that he didn't hit Lolo Carding very hard. But when Tonyo asked Tatay why he had hit Lolo Carding when he was only trying to help, Tatay punched Tonyo so hard, his mouth was swollen for a week. Now, every time Tatay came home drunk, he would beat Tonyo.

At first Tonyo held his temper and would not lift a finger to defend himself. He would only clench his fists and bite his lower lip. They often bled. But after a few beatings, Tonyo finally exploded and began to fight back. The fights were terrible. Things were thrown around and knocked about. Melody, Ryan and Neneng cried from fright. It got so bad that Mang Ador and his son had to run over several times to stop the fights. Tonyo would leave and stay at Lolo Carding's, where his grandfather tended to his wounds. But he often worried about his younger siblings. Would Tatay vent his anger on them now that he was gone? But

he knew that the longer he stayed at home, things would get much worse between him and his father. That was when Tonyo decided he would leave and join his mother. Maybe he could stay with her and get a job in Hong Kong. Better yet, he would ask her to come home. Maybe Tatay acted the way he did because he missed her very much. Tonyo did.

Fredo, Tonyo's best friend was the first to hear of his plans. They often got into scrapes together, with Fredo often prevailing upon Tonyo to stay cool. "Are you crazy?" was Fredo's response upon hearing of Tonyo's plans. "Where will you get the money to go to Hong Kong? What will you do when you get there? What if you don't find your mother?" Lolo Carding tried to dissuade him from going as well. "Who would protect the other children?" he asked. "Why don't you just write your mother and ask her to come home? Tell her what's happening here."

Tonyo could not be dissuaded. "No, Lolo, I might as well go to her. Besides, she would never believe me or you or anyone else. Ryan, Melody and Neneng still need the money she sends and Tatay's debts are getting bigger." Lolo Carding finally agreed to Tonyo's plan. He also knew that living with Tatay had become unbearable for Tonyo. He knew that if Tonyo stayed any longer,

things could get much worse. He would also look after the younger ones. "Stay until after your birthday. We'll have a small party here."

Lolo Carding arranged for Tonyo to travel to Manila with Nanang Maria. She was going to Manila on one of her regular visits to her son and spending the summer with him. She also needed a traveling companion. Last time she went, Nanay was with her. Her son worked in one of the big banks in the city and had a house. "Don't worry," Lolo Carding told Nanang Maria, "Tonyo won't be a bother. He doesn't eat very much, can sleep anywhere and will help with the chores."

CHAPTER 4



TONYO LEAVES

Sunrise found Tonyo and Nanang Maria settled somewhat comfortably on the bus to Culasi. It was the first of only two trips and it sped through the narrow and bumpy provincial roads kicking up more dust than anyone cared for. Tonyo hoped to catch the sunrise but the constant cloud of dust blocked any sight of what was usually a glorious one. All Tonyo had with him was the red knapsack Nanay had sent him for Christmas. It was filled with some clothes, a worn toothbrush and the only book Tonyo ever owned called *Favorite Bible Stories* that Madam Letty had given him for his birthday. A few *monay* buns were tucked in one pocket while another held a small flashlight from Lolo Carding, another birthday present. "You'll never know when you'll be needing it," he had said. Tucked in between the pages of Tonyo's book was his mother's address

in Hong Kong and P1,000.00 that he had earned from selling two piglets, one of which was the runt. Having to sell the runt broke Tonyo's heart but he knew he needed the money if he were to reach Hong Kong and his mother. He had named it Monay, because it was as plump as his favorite bread.

The sounds of the city woke Tonyo from his nap. In no time, they would be at the port, then on the ship and on their way to Manila. He wondered what Manila would be like. Was it anything like Culasi? Those he knew who had visited Manila spoke of it as if it were a land of wonder.

"So many cars and buses and *jeepneys*."

"Too many people."

"Such bright lights."

"Too much dust."

"Lots of tall buildings."

"Lots of stores."

Nanang Maria had been to Manila many times since her son moved and she never liked it. "It smells horrible," was all she would say as she crinkled up her nose.

Tonyo and Nanang Maria shared a bunk bed on the *MV Doña Corazon*, the same boat that his mother took. She took the bed below and he, the top bunk. For most of the trip, the old woman stayed in her bunk, seasick for most of the trip, while Tonyo roamed throughout the ship. Tonyo was glad for the freedom. He found the Second Class area too dark, too hot, too crowded and somewhat frightening. One look out one of the small portholes that hardly let in any air told him they were at the bottom of the ship. Most of the neon bulbs were busted or grounded. The bunk beds were positioned so close to each other that even Nanang Maria, who was only slightly bigger than Tonyo, had to walk sideways between them. As soon as the old lady had settled into her bunk, he ran up the stairs that led to the first deck. From there he watched the ship sail farther and farther away from the port, from the city, from his village. He imagined his mother staring at the same scene. For the first time since he had made the decision to leave home to be with his mother, Tonyo was scared. He thought, "I don't even know where Hong Kong is! How do I get there? If I do get there, how will I find my mother?" All these questions zoomed around Tonyo's head. The blast of the ship's horn broke his thoughts. Tonyo took a deep breath. It seemed the smell of the sea helped strengthen his resolve. He was going to find his mother.

The young boy looked around the ship. He was amazed at how such a large vessel could float and not sink. He watched as the sailors scurried around and the other passengers roamed the ship. Many were headed to the canteen on the top deck. Tonyo decided to follow, not because he was hungry but because he noticed that was also where the captain's deck was.

Tonyo didn't have the courage to knock on the deck door. But through a porthole, he saw how the Captain kept an eye on the ocean with his binoculars and how his First Mate steered the ship clear of coral beds, sandbars and shoals. He saw how the other officers constantly checked their instruments and reported every change to the Captain. Tonyo would have stayed there the whole day had not his stomach begun to growl. He remembered Nanang Maria and went back down to check on her.

He found her sitting up in her bunk eating a banana. She saw Tonyo and told him that there was some rice, fried chicken and a banana for him too. She had brought some *baon* for the two of them. Tonyo sat beside the old lady eager for lunch. He was terribly hungry. He hardly took the time to chew his food. "Slow down," admonished Nanang Maria, "or you might get a tummy ache."

Tonyo only nodded, his mouth full of the cold rice and chicken.

"Carding has told me that you are going to Manila to stay with some relatives. Do you know where they live?" asked Nanang Maria.

Tonyo only shook his head.

"Do you have their address?" Tonyo nodded again, his mouth still full.

"Well, you can stay with us for a while until you find your relatives. Maybe my son can help you. He's lived in Manila for many years," offered Nanang Maria.

Tonyo gulped his food down and said, "Thank you Nanang Maria. I certainly could use some help."

"You've been a good boy Tonyo. I've watched you take care of the younger children since your mother left to work in Hong Kong and I've also seen you take your father home from the beer garden even if you know that may mean a beating. I'll pray things work out for you."

Tonyo took the old woman's hand in his and put it on his forehead. "Thank you Nanang," he repeated.

The sea's gentle rocking soon put Nanang Maria to sleep. Again Tonyo left the cabin to

explore the ship some more. By evening, he had been to the kitchen, the engine room, the sailor's quarters and even to the First Class deck. He joined Nanang Maria for their evening meal and left her again as soon as she fell asleep.

Standing on the top deck, comfortably leaning on the ship rails, Tonyo looked at the night sky. It was filled with stars. "That," said a deep voice behind him, "is the North Star."

Tonyo turned to see the Captain himself leaning beside him. He was pointing at the brightest star in the night sky. "We use that star to guide us on our many trips, but our ancestors looked down at the reefs, coral beds and shoreline to help them navigate. Isn't it beautiful?" Tonyo nodded his head, keeping his eyes on the North Star. "I saw you peeping into the deck this morning. Are you traveling alone?"

Tonyo looked at the Captain and answered, "No, I travel with a grandmother."

The Captain looked at Tonyo and said, "Have a good trip. May you reach your destination safely. We will be near Manila when you wake up tomorrow. Good night."

Tonyo watched as the Captain walked to his cabin. He stayed on deck a little while longer. He focused on the North Star and whispered, "Please, brightest of stars, lead me to my mother."

Tonyo had difficulty sleeping. The cabin was just too hot and the smell of people mixed with that of food and cigarette smoke was overwhelming. People kept moving around, talking in loud whispers. Tonyo decided he would sleep on deck. With a small flat pillow tucked under his arm and a cotton sheet wrapped around his slight body, he walked up to the deck and chose an empty deck chair. It seemed many others had the same thought, for almost all the chairs were filled with people cocooned in deep slumber. The cool *habagat* breeze and the sound of the sea lapping against the boat soon put Tonyo to sleep.

He was awakened early the next morning by the cheers of some sailors and passengers. They stood by the ship's railing and were pointing excitedly to something in the ocean. Tonyo leaned over and the sight he beheld left him breathless for a long while. Swimming right beside the boat were some six to ten charcoal black dolphins. They dove in and out of the water, frolicking in the wake of the ship. They swam so fast, that many times, all Tonyo could see were dark streaks in the blue water. And then they were gone. Tonyo ran down to tell Nanang Maria what he had seen. Between *monay* bites and sips of coffee, he told her about the dolphins. Nanang Maria said she had seen some of those too on her trips to Manila.

CHAPTER 5



MANILA

Soon the *MV Doña Corazon* docked in the port of Manila. Even before Tonyo saw the harbor, he smelled it. The stench of the city floated over the sea like an invisible dome. This was a much bigger port than the one in Culasi. As far as the eyes could see, there were ships lined up one after the other across the pier. There were more floating outside the breakwater, many of them needing a new coat of paint. Many were coughing up passengers while others, goods such as sacks of rice, lumber and machinery. Tonyo watched the large cranes dig into the ships' belly to bring out the goods. They reminded him of the white egrets that came to hunt for snails in the rice fields. Scattered all over the dirty and greasy pavement were towers of crates in several sizes. Some, it seemed, had been sitting there for ages. On others were men just as greasy as the pavement who were

MANILA

either eating or taking a quick nap. Vans, as long as twenty feet, carrying immense crates maneuvered expertly around the port blowing their deep horns. Smaller loaders nipped in and around loading and unloading boxes. The port of Manila seemed like a much bigger and busier ant hill than that of Culasi.

"Hold on to me and don't let go," advised Nanang Maria as she searched for her son among the noisy throng that came to meet the ship. They reminded Tonyo of the black ants that swarmed around the drops of Aling Siony's homemade ice cream. "There are always people looking for the *prohinsiyano* to trick and steal from. Look like you know where you're going," advised the old lady. Finally she caught the attention of her son, Dolfo by waving her arms wildly in the air like laundry in a storm. He came up to them greatly agitated. He was nothing at all like his mother. He was flabby and sweating profusely through his long-sleeved linen *barong tagalog* that was buttoned to his neck. He had a scowl that was perfect for the scarecrow that farmers planted in the middle of their rice fields to frighten the greedy sparrows that hung about the fields and orchards.

"Where have you been?" he inquired angrily from his mother. "I've been looking for you all over the pier! And who is this scrawny little boy with you?"

"Why we've been looking for you!" answered his mother. "And this little boy is Carding's grandson. He accompanied me on the boat and is in Manila on his way to look for his mother in Hong Kong. He will be staying with us for a few days."

"What!" yelled Dolfo, now greatly agitated. "I can hardly feed myself, now I have to feed a boy. Do you know how much they eat?"

"Don't worry," said Nanang Maria, "as you can see from his size, he eats very little and will help me around the house. Anyway, I have brought a lot of food from the province. Please stop arguing and get us out of here and home." With great reluctance and having really no choice, Dolfo agreed to let Tonyo stay in his house.

On the cab trip from the pier to Dolfo's house, Tonyo marveled at the bright lights that festooned the city still celebrating the Christmas season. Dolfo's 'house', it turned out, was a small one-bedroom apartment on top of a bakery not far from the pier, but it had a toilet that flushed and running water. Tonyo was relieved to know he didn't need to leave the apartment to go to the bathroom. It was one of those apartments that was built "before the war" and had seen better days. It had large grilled windows that looked down onto the street below and let in the sea breeze that sometimes managed

to squeeze through the alleys. It was located on a street where traffic never ceased and was right in front of a disco. Dolfo lived alone and gave Nanang Maria his room while he and Tonyo slept on straw mats in the living room.

During the day, the smell of newly baked bread from the bakery below and dust from the street filled the small apartment. At night, the music from the disco kept Tonyo awake most of the evening, but served as Dolfo's lullabies. By the fifth song, Dolfo was fast asleep. Tonyo couldn't understand how Dolfo could sleep through the screeching guitar that pierced his ears and the booming drums that he could feel right through his stomach.

But life in Manila proved very interesting for Tonyo. He accompanied Nanang Maria on her many forays around the city. The market was much like the one at home, but much bigger. The supermarket though was a place Tonyo had never seen before. It was not only brighter but had air-conditioning! Only the lone movie house in their town had an air-conditioner, although it was broken most of the time. And the shelves! They were filled with so many things! There were all colors and sizes of cans, bottles, boxes and bags filled with all sorts of mysterious but delicious-looking things. Large freezers were filled with

meat, fish, chicken and ice cream. Counters were overflowing with vegetables and fruit, cheese and milk. He could spend the whole day in the supermarket and wouldn't have seen everything yet. And there were those large stores called malls! His whole village could fit in a mall. Tonyo went up and down the escalator. Moving stairs! Melody, Ryan and Neneng had to see those. And the box that went up and down which Nanang Maria called elevators. She was scared of them. Dolfo would spend precious minutes arguing with her on how safe they were, but, much to Dolfo's embarrassment, Nanang Maria would not enter one — especially those that had glass walls — not even if you pushed her. Going up made her dizzy. Going down made her nauseous. But Tonyo loved it. He loved watching the people get smaller and the feeling of having left his stomach on the floor below. At the mall, he saw a poster that said, "Hong Kong Tour US\$350.00 — 3 days, 3 nights". As soon as he got home, he asked Dolfo, who worked in a bank, how much 350 dollars was in pesos. Dolfo looked at the ceiling and thought awhile. Then he looked at Tonyo and said, "About twelve thousand pesos."

For the second time since he left home, Tonyo felt he would not see his mother. He now knew he needed more money. But how was he ever going to make money?

Soon it was time for Nanang Maria to go home. She would bring news of Tonyo to Lolo Carding. "Tell him I'm fine," requested Tonyo. Nanang Maria asked Dolfo to let Tonyo stay. Dolfo said it was all right. Tonyo had been a great help. The house was always clean and not in the mess he usually had it in, and he had kept his mother company. But the minute Nanang Maria stepped onto the plank that led to the boat, Dolfo looked at Tonyo and said, "You can't stay with me anymore. I only allowed you to stay because my mother asked." Tonyo had no intention of staying any longer with Dolfo. He was a fat, selfish slob who didn't deserve the attention his mother dumped on him. "Don't worry, I found a place to stay," Tonyo answered.

CHAPTER 6



STREET GANGS AND TROUBLE

Tonyo didn't have a place to stay. He roamed the city late into the night until his bones shook with fatigue. He spotted a busy noodle house that advertised large bowls of noodles for only thirty pesos. He felt his saliva collect behind his palate. Already, he could taste the hot salty noodles sliding down his throat.

As he lined up for his serving, Tonyo stared at the array of food warming behind the counter. The hole he carried in his stomach the whole day began to contract. But he would have to save his money. He walked past the noodle house, the smell of boiled beef trailing him. He would need a place to sleep. He looked around the area surrounding the noodle house. There was a building going up. He walked around the construction area unnoticed. The guard was slumped on his chair fast asleep. He

STREET GANGS AND TROUBLE

walked further until he came to a bridge at the end of the construction site where he noticed a large abandoned culvert under the bridge. It looked comfortable enough to sleep in. He scampered down the grade and entered the culvert. He settled his back into the hard cold cement and thought of his warm mat at home. He had known Nanang Maria would leave soon and that Dolfo couldn't wait to get rid of him. He also knew finding his mother wouldn't be easy. What had he been thinking off? A short prayer escaped his mouth. "Dear God, help me find my mother. My father needs her. Melody, Ryan and Neneng need her. I need her."

A sharp pain in his side startled him awake. He opened his eyes to see three boys about the same age as himself staring down at him. His first reaction was to clench his fist and lunge at the figure closest to him. A rough hand grabbed his and held it tight. The light that came from the construction site allowed Tonyo to see the owner of the hand clearly. He was with two other boys. They all looked mean and tough. Their eyes were sharp with anger and their mouths clenched so tightly that their jaws bulged. They stood over him with balled fists. "What are you doing here?" growled the one with the red-streaked hair. "This is our place," hissed the one with a dirty bandana wrapped around his head. The one that held him

whose eyes were as red as Tatay's black rooster said nothing and only continued to stare at him. Tonyo tried to wriggle free but the stronger boy's grip just got tighter and tighter. The one with the red-streaked hair picked up Tonyo's knapsack and began to search through Tonyo's stuff. He picked up the Bible book Tonyo had and flipped through the covers. All Tonyo's money fluttered to the ground. They immediately disappeared into the boy's pockets. Tonyo stopped breathing. Now what? Red-eyes brought Tonyo closer to him, so close, that Tonyo could smell the smoke and beer in his breath. "The flashlight's mine." Then he backed off, let Tonyo go, and said to the others, "Leave him alone. He's probably just come from the province." To Tonyo he said, "You can stay here tonight but by tomorrow morning you have to be out of here right away."

"Understand?!" the one with the bandana screamed in Tonyo's ear before he cuffed it.

Tonyo bent down to pick up his knapsack and his book with his bruised hand while the other cupped his stinging ear. Everything else, the boys took. Thank goodness they at least left him those. He kept his head down, as he didn't want the boys to see the fear in his eyes or the tears that were welling up. He was also too scared to say anything. All four boys crept into the culvert. The three

toughies fell asleep almost immediately. Tonyo thought to leave and find another place to sleep. There must be more of these cement doughnuts all over the city. But he was too tired. His body had glued itself to the cold hard walls of the culvert. And, he had to try and get his money back. He looked at the boys. They didn't seem so scary now. He settled himself at the edge of the culvert, as far away from the boys as he could. He was still too frightened to fall asleep immediately and although the sting in his ears had disappeared, his hand still throbbed with the memory of Red-Eyes' painful grip. But fatigue began creeping up on him and he soon fell asleep.

The sound of activity on the construction site woke the boys. As Tonyo stretched himself out like a butterfly that had just emerged from its cocoon, Red-eyes tugged the hem of his pants and asked, "Hungry?" Tonyo sprung into a crouch ready to defend himself if needed. Red-eyes backed off and kicked the other two boys awake, who immediately began to complain.

"*Pare naman*, you didn't have to kick me so hard."

"*Ano ba?*"

"You wouldn't have woken up," shot back Red-eyes. "You sniffed too much of that glue last night. You were out like a light as soon as you put

down your head. You too, Samboy." The two boys smiled sheepishly and scratched their heads. Tonyo had no idea about what they were talking about. At least he knew that the one with the bandana was called Samboy. With a jerk of his head, Red-eyes told Tonyo to follow. Still wary of them and hoping to still be able to get his money back before they spent it, Tonyo followed, careful to keep some distance between them.

The boys seemed to know where they were going. They walked through alleys and avoided some streets altogether until they reached the back of a large, twenty-four hour Chinese fast food restaurant. They were in time to see a kitchen helper bring out a black plastic bag. The three toughies quickly ran to the bag before the cats and dogs around the neighborhood beat them to it. Tonyo saw that the bag was filled with styrofoam boxes, some of which were empty while others had leftovers. "C'mon," said Red-eyes as he signaled with his hands, "this is breakfast, lunch and possibly dinner." Tonyo hesitated. He wasn't really that hungry. But Red-eyes said, "You'll never know when you can eat again." Tonyo could feel the air whistling around in his stomach. He joined the boys. They had a feast. There were soggy, fried noodles with equally soggy vegetables, cold fried rice, and an occasional piece of meat or chicken. At least, they still had his

money, thought Tonyo, as he gobbled down his food. The other boys were equally hungry and no words were exchanged as they wolfed down the food. A series of loud burps signaled the end of the feast. The rest of the leftovers were for the cats that waited hungrily behind the garbage cans.

"Mang Jun should be awake by now," noted Samboy.

"Yeah, we should head for his house now. He might have a job for us," agreed Red-eyes, who looked at Tonyo and asked, "Want a job?"

Tonyo nodded his head, still too wary to ask what kind of job. The boys continued to walk through the maze that was the city. There were streets that seemed to go on endlessly while others ended abruptly or turned off unexpectedly into another. Tonyo had never seen this part before.

It was much dirtier than where Dolfo lived. The smell of garbage hung heavily over it as did that of fear. Many of the edifices were so old that they were about ready to fall. Only mice and cockroaches would be happy in these buildings. The houses were mostly made of discarded wood and galvanized iron. They stood in lopsided rows like crumpled cards — easy prey to fire and typhoon. Old election banners served as curtains to hide the squalor inside. Children were pouring out from these homes that seemed to float on a sea

of garbage. Even if he managed to get his money back and escape from the boys, he wouldn't know where to go as they got deeper into the maze.

Finally, the boys stopped in front of a house that stood apart from the rest. It was the only house built with cement. Only half of it had been painted a light blue color. The other half had a long way to go. It had grilled windows and a wooden door that was heavily bolted. After all that expense, it seemed the owner had abandoned it halfway.

Red-eyes knocked softly, almost respectfully at the shut door. It was quiet for a long time. He knocked again. Suddenly, a deafening "*Ano?*" exploded from inside the house, almost pushing the door open. "It . . . It's us Mang Jun," stammered Red-eyes. "We're here to ask if you have a job for us."

The door suddenly jerked open and there standing in front of it was the meanest man Tonyo had ever seen. He must have come straight from hell. He lacked only a pair of horns on his round head and a long scaly tail that slipped out from his loose dirty shorts. Tonyo looked down to see if his feet were cloven, like those of a carabao. He watched as the three toughies turned to jelly in front of this man. The smell of evil was so strong that it nauseated Tonyo. Through his lips that hid no more than dozen-yellowed teeth, Mang Jun

hissed, "So it's you Benny and your puny gang. Looks like the police haven't caught you yet, *ha*. Come inside, I might have something for you. My neighbors hate me but they listen to everything I say. Right Anding?" he said as he spat towards the next house. Tonyo looked up to see a figure at the window disappear quickly inside the house. "Okay, the area around the park is yours. The guys there were caught and are now in jail. Who's the new member?" he asked sharply eyeing Tonyo as he kept pulling his shorts up.

"Someone we found last night. It's okay." "He's harmless," answered Benny, "he'll be our lookout."

"If you guys do well on this one, I'll let you in on a bigger deal. Now get out and let me sleep!" snarled Mang Jun.

The boys scampered out of the disheveled house and began to walk quickly towards the park. Tonyo hesitated, his heart pounding wildly. He had an idea of what the boys were up to and didn't want any part in it. But, he had to try and get his money back. As he stood rooted to the ground, wondering what to do, Benny grabbed him by the arm and said, "You're with us now *probinsiyano*. You try to run away and Bugoy here will stick a knife in you so fast you won't even feel it." Tonyo heard a sharp click behind him and saw the glint of

a fan knife in Bugoy's hand. Tonyo wet his pants. He followed the boys knowing that he would have to try and control his temper. Unlike in Luaun, where most of the boys looked up to him as a leader, here, his very life was in danger if he didn't follow orders.

Their first target was the *jeepney* stop along the boulevard. "Watch out for the police or any of the traffic enforcers," ordered Benny. "Two loud whistles will do." Tonyo stood in the far corner. He watched the boys make a quick run through the lines of people and emerge with one leather bag. It was filled with handkerchiefs of all colors, a soft make-up bag, some keys, lots of receipts and a fat wallet. It yielded many coins and seven hundred pesos. The boys were ecstatic. So much on the first try. They ran down to the next street and there managed to grab the knapsack of a day-dreaming schoolgirl. It held a number of books and notebooks, two *pan de sals* filled with cheese spread and a small woven purse. Fifty pesos was all it yielded. The boys split the filled bread and Samboy got to keep the fifty pesos, as he was the one quick enough to grab the knapsack. Benny got to keep the knapsack. Tonyo felt sorry for the schoolgirl. Not only because she lost her *baon* and probably some money earned, but she would be without her books.

STREET GANGS AND TROUBLE

The boys spent the rest of the day looking for easy prey. They managed to steal a few more hundred pesos between the three of them. Several times Tonyo had to blow the two-whistle signal that cops were around. The first time he had to do it, no sound would leave his puckered lips. Much as he tried, only air would leave his lips. He was too frightened to let out a full-blooded whistle. Then he realized that if the boys were caught, he could never get his money back. And if they managed to escape, which they had many times, they would come after him and really beat him up until he could no longer feel his bones or worse, stick a knife into his ribs. Tonyo released two ear-splitting whistles that sent the three boys running in all directions. After that, Tonyo had no problems letting those whistles out.

CHAPTER 7



DANGEROUS ERRANDS

As soon as the sun set, Benny called them all together and they headed back to Mang Jun's house. The older man took most of the money and gave Benny a hundred pesos. Then he offered them the "bigger deal".

"I need guys to sell this stuff for me," he said while pointing with his pudgy, nicotine-stained fingers to a pile of little packs filled with white powder. "You guys tough enough?" The three boys looked at each other. Tonyo could see that the prospect scared them somewhat, but a slight glint in their eyes said they were going for the thrill and bigger bucks. Mang Jun gave each of the boys, except Tonyo, a few packets. This was the first time they were going to do this. He couldn't risk losing any of the packets to the police. In case they got caught, they could throw the stuff away and the loss wouldn't be too much. His big bosses would

DANGEROUS ERRANDS

put it down as part of the operations. "Sell this stuff. Come back here with the money and if everything is okay, you get to do it again, but only if I have every centavo. Understand! Now get out and don't come back until everything's been sold. I don't care who you sell it to," yelled Mang Jun.

With the money they had, Benny bought himself and the boys two sticks each of barbecue being sold at the corner and some cigarettes. Then they headed towards the part of town where there were rows of restaurants and bars. This time, they had a different sort of business to take care of. It was late in the night and some of those that drifted in and out of the bars noticed the boys and approached them. Tonyo watched as Benny brought out a small pack and took a lot of bills in exchange. The three boys took turns doing this all the way into the early morning. Those that were not selling also kept an eye out for the police and on Tonyo. They didn't dare try to steal from anyone in this area. Most people were tougher than they were, including the women.

Tonyo had not moved from his watch post for many hours. His head had begun to hurt from lack of sleep and from being extremely tense. Not once did he have to give his two-whistle warning call. As a matter of fact, there were no police to speak of. The boys finally met again at about three in the

early morning. They too seemed tired but were jumpy and excited. "We must have about ten thousand pesos between the three of us. All three kept their hands in their pockets, afraid to lose the money, touching something they never had so much of in their whole life. They finally arrived at Mang Jun's. The devil-man was very much awake. They handed him the money and stood there as he counted it. "Here's your cut. Come by again later if you want to do it again," he muttered as he handed Benny some rolled up and crumpled bills. "The more you sell, the more you can make. Any problems with the cops?"

"Nope," answered Benny as he put his arm around Tonyo, "this guy here is a good watcher." They left as soon as they could, Tonyo being the first one out. The house reeked of stale gin which reminded him too much of his father.

"Hoy," called Benny after Tonyo, "I don't even know your name. I'm Benny and these are my pals Samboy and Bugoy."

"I already know your names," answered Tonyo. He wondered if he should give his real name. "Mine is . . . Tonyo."

"Even your name is so *probinsyano*," snickered Samboy.

"You might want to change it to Tony," suggested Bugoy.

The three boys laughed as they strode back to the culvert they called home. They could all use a good day's sleep. Tonight would be another adventure. Huddled inside the culvert, Benny doled out the money they got. He gave himself a little more and divided the rest equally among the others including Tonyo. Tonyo looked at the bills in his hand. This was more than what the boys had stolen from him.

A week passed and Tonyo was still with the boys. They continued to steal and sell drugs, with Tonyo as the lookout. They often talked about trying the stuff inside the packets but never dared. They called it *shabu*.

Sometimes they met with other gangs of boys, some with girls, with whom they would share stories. They boasted of their steals but never mentioned they sold drugs. They didn't want anyone else sharing the business. Many had stories like Tonyo's. He wondered what sort of stories Benny, Bugoy and Samboy had. Some of them held odd jobs like washing cars or selling cigarettes. Others begged on the streets. Benny and his gang, it seemed, were the luckier ones.

When they had money to spend, they could go for a couple of days without having to see Mang Jun. But when the money ran out, they went to see him. Most days, they were able to afford a decent meal but what Tonyo wanted most was to have a bath. The stench that his own unwashed body and dirty clothes gave off made him nauseous. He felt like he had a hard second skin like that of a crocodile — hard and scaly. He was often tempted to jump into the nearby bay and cleanse his body of all the filth it had accumulated. Little did Tonyo know, he would get his wish soon and more.

Like most summer days, the morning brought the heat of the sun. By noon, the boys felt their brown skins begin to heat up. Soon they would crackle and sizzle like the *chicharon* cooking in lard over an open fire. It was the usually silent Bugoy who made the suggestion. "Why don't we go swimming?" Without a word, the three other boys made a dash for the boulevard. They hopped onto the concrete breakwater where they left their clothes, and jumped on the moss-filled rocks below. They dove into the murky water of the bay and came up only when their lungs were about to burst.

"Wow!" yelled Samboy.

"Pptsssh!" spluttered Bugoy.

"Yaaah!" shouted Benny.

DANGEROUS ERRANDS

"Aaaah," was all Tonyo could say. He missed the beach that was a few kilometers walk from his house in Luaun. He and Fredo used to go there a lot, especially on a day like this. They jumped the waves that came in, searched the clear water for fish fry, the sand for tiny crabs, and buried each other in the sand.

What would Fredo say if he knew what I was doing now? What would Lolo Carding say? What would Nanay say? These thoughts rushed through Tonyo's head as he floated on his back and stared at the stark blue sky. His eyes began to water. This was not how he planned it. He plunged his head into the water.

When he finally came up for air, he found himself beside a large shipping vessel. It was very different from the boat he had taken to Manila from the province. This one seemed to have sailed to all ports on the earth. Its bulk was painted black but had enormous patches of rust in many places like many of the other ships anchored along the bay. From where he was, he could see the crane lift large crates onto the ship. At night, the ships weren't so ugly. They twinkled with lights. Tonyo could only imagine the beautiful and exotic places they sailed to. He wondered which one of these sailed to Hong Kong.

Realizing that he had swum out a little too far, Tonyo paddled back to the other boys. He looked at them splashing about in the water. Benny and Samboy were picking on poor Bugoy who couldn't swim very well. He knew he would have to leave the boys soon before he got into big trouble. But right now, they were all the family and friends he had. As long as he himself didn't steal, he was not like them, or so he thought.

The boys lingered in the water until their hands and feet were all wrinkled and soft. Then they clambered up the rocks and sat there like clams until they were dry. Samboy pulled out a tube of rugby glue from his pant pocket and began to sniff it. Then he passed it on to the two other boys. Benny offered the tube to Tonyo, but he declined. Soon all three boys began to giggle about nothing in particular. Their eyeballs began to turn in their sockets. Then they stood up and began to hop about the rocks and dance. They wiggled their hips, stomped their feet and howled in laughter. They swung their arms over their heads and shrieked. They slipped on the rocks and fell over each other. They tried to get Tonyo to join their wild and crazy dance. But he pulled back every time. Eventually they left him alone.

The effects of the drugs began to wear off just as the sun began to come down. None of the boys

noticed the famous splash of pink and saffron hues on the horizon as they climbed back up on the cement breakwater. The boys were still woozy from their "trip" and Tonyo was deep in thought. He would have to carefully plan his getaway.

From the boulevard, the boys went straight to Mang Jun's house. They found their way through the maze of dimly-lit houses to his house with Tonyo's flashlight. They had missed it and had to work themselves back. They found him sprawled on the floor in total darkness, knocked out by a wallop of gin and beer, his mouth open to whatever was brave enough to enter. "Naku, he won't wake up till tomorrow," lamented Benny. The boys marched out of the house and up to their old corner in the shadows. They waited, like hungry vultures, for their victims to pass by. But this time, they weren't so lucky.

"Thief, thief!" screamed a shrill voice from the far corner. Tonyo looked around to see the three boys running away from a tall woman dressed in a tight satin dress, flaying her arms over her head and screaming. He was surprised to see, as were the boys, that she could run pretty fast even in her black high-heeled shoes. She ran fast enough to be able to seize Bugoy's t-shirt, lift him up slightly from the ground and swing her large, black, bulky bag at him, her muscles like rocks

under her skin. She hit him so hard that he blacked out. A burly policeman came out of nowhere in time to pick him up. She would have hit Bugoy again had not the policeman stopped her. Tonyo began to run too. He could hear Benny and Samboy running behind him, another policeman giving chase. Tonyo had no idea where he was going. He just ran and ran and ran to the beat of his racing heart.

CHAPTER 8



FATHER RANDY

He finally came to a church. The police would never think of looking for him there. Besides, they were probably busy running after Samboy and Benny. The large main door, filled with carvings of angels and devils, was locked. But a smaller door, carved into the larger one, was ajar.

Tonyo pushed the little door. It opened easily. Someone had forgotten to lock up for the night. He stood by the church door, waiting for his heart to settle down. It was so close to jumping out of his mouth. Inside, it was as dark as ink, except for a few candles slowly burning away in a far corner of the church. He remembered his mother telling him they were prayers from those in need being sent up to heaven for the Lord to hear. Tonyo needed a prayer badly. The police were looking for him. If they caught him, he would surely go to jail and

would never see his mother. She would be angry and disappointed to even want to call him son. Tonyo picked up one of the burning candles and lighted another. He shut his eyes tight as he had seen the old women do, and began to pray.

He had never prayed harder in his life. He prayed God would accept his prayer even if he had not paid for it. He prayed the police would never catch him. He prayed Tatay would change. He prayed that Melody, Ryan and Neneng were fine and in school. He prayed Lolo Carding was eating well. He prayed that Nanay was happy. He prayed he would find her soon. Tonyo opened his eyes. His candle burned brightly and the smoke rose straight to heaven. The Lord would hear his prayer.

Tonyo fell asleep on one of the pews near the candles. His last thoughts were on how Tasiong Tamad, the town bum, spent many a drunken night on the benches of Father Edgar's church. Even here, they were as hard as rock and as narrow as a rat's tail. But this church was nothing like the one at home. This was so much bigger and ten churches like theirs could have probably fit inside.

He was awakened early the next morning by the sound of wood grating on cement tiles. He turned to see a young man opening the large cathedral doors. Tonyo got up and quickly crouched behind the large statue of St. Joseph.

Soon, the church was filled with the early morning mass crowd. Tonyo dared not move from his hiding place, much less venture back outside. What if one of the policemen had seen him sneak into the church and was waiting for him outside?

By late morning, Tonyo was faint with hunger. He couldn't remember when he had last eaten anything. He pressed his bony knees further against his stomach to ease the pain and hush its growls. He lay his head on his knees to stop the dizziness. He had to eat something. Through the fog of his misery, he heard the drone of the priest's voice and the singing of the faithful. A Mass had just begun. Then he heard the clinking of coins in the alms basket as it was passed from one churchgoer to another. He looked up. "God knows how miserable I've been. Surely a few pesos from the alms basket won't be missed," thought Tonyo. "I need more money to go to Hong Kong." He stepped out from behind the statue and eased himself into the corner of a pew. He tried to remember how the boys did it. "Forgive me Lord, I will pay you back as soon as I can," he prayed. The basket was in his hands. He passed it on. In between his fingers was a hundred peso bill. He looked up. No one had seemed to notice. He tucked the bill into his pant pocket. Instead of rushing out, he stayed in place. As soon as the

Mass was finished, he would quickly but quietly leave.

Tonyo rushed to the door even before the priest finished the Mass. But before he could make his escape, he felt a firm hand clasp his shoulder. He turned to see the young man who had opened the church doors. In a gentle voice he said, "Son, I think we need to talk."

Without saying another word, the young priest led Tonyo to a little room behind the altar. It was where the priests prepared for Mass. It had a closet for the vestments and other priestly paraphernalia and a small square table covered with crocheted lace just like the ones his mother used to make. It was beside this table that the priest invited Tonyo to sit. The priest sat on the other side.

Before he sat down, Tonyo fished into his pocket and pulled out the one hundred peso bill he had stolen from the collection basket and gave it to the priest. Father Randy took the bill from Tonyo and said somewhat sternly, "It seems you not only have no money, but also nowhere to go. I saw you asleep on the pew last night and thought you would be gone by this morning, as the other boys usually are."

Tonyo could only look down. Suddenly, the line of ants on the floor seemed very interesting.

"What's your name? Where are you from?" asked the priest, this time in a gentler voice. "You don't seem to belong to any of the gangs that roam this neighborhood." At the change in the priest's tone of voice, Tonyo looked up and saw a face that was truly concerned for him. The priest's dark eyes looked directly at Tonyo and without hesitation his story came tumbling out of his mouth, the words and sentences falling on each other. "Hold on," said the priest as he laughed, "when was the last time you ate and had a bath?"

The priest led Tonyo to the convent behind the old church. Here, it was cool and quiet, a place so near, yet so far removed from the noisy and dangerous streets outside. Tonyo followed the priest as he walked down an open corridor that looked out to a large well-tended garden. Tonyo was surprised by the different birdcalls that drizzled from the many trees that surrounded the garden. It had been a long time since he heard any. Tears began to collect behind his eyes. He remembered his home in far away Lauan. He missed Ryan, Melody, Neneng, Lolo Carding and even Tatay. Maybe he should think of going back. Maybe finding Nanay was too difficult. Maybe...

"*Kamusta* Father Randy! Who's the new boy?" asked a gardener leaning over large pots of bougainvillea. The loud, happy greeting

interrupted Tonyo's tears and thoughts. It seemed like Tonyo was not the first boy to wander into the church. "His name is Tonyo and he arrived last night," answered the priest while turning to wink at Tonyo, "and he's in need of a good meal and a nice shower. Please tell Manang Saling we have a new boy."

"Manang Saling cooked some *longganisa* and eggs this morning. There should be some left," volunteered the gardener. Tonyo's mouth began to water. He couldn't wait to sink his teeth into some decent food. "She probably also has some left over cake from yesterday's birthday celebration," he added. At the mention of the word birthday, Tonyo remembered his own. Was it just a few days ago? Had it been a little more than a year since he left home?

Father Randy showed Tonyo where he could sit in the vast dining room that was filled with several long tables and chairs. It was empty at this hour. A small door led to a large kitchen from where the sound of cooking spilled out. Pots and pans clanged, as kettles hissed, as Manang Saling barked orders, as stews were stirred, and forks and spoons were sorted. The sweet smell of baking bread escaped through the door and wafted through the dining room to Tonyo's eager nose. By the time the plate heaped with rice, eggs and

longganisa was placed in front of him, Tonyo could have eaten a carabao. He wolfed down the food as fast as he could, afraid that if he didn't finish it right away, it would vanish, like a dream. Father Randy watched him eat, only saying, "Take it easy, you're going to get a stomach-ache."

When Tonyo finally sat back, his stomach bulging underneath his t-shirt, Father Randy asked him, "So, how do you plan to find your mother? You don't have enough money."

Tonyo looked away and said in a voice resigned to his fate, "I really don't know Father. Maybe I should just go home."

Father Randy almost agreed with Tonyo until he saw the look of disappointment and failure in Tonyo's eyes. "I can't send you to Hong Kong but maybe I can help you earn enough money to get to Hong Kong. The bakery that delivers our bread here at the convent is need of a boy to do odd jobs. It might not pay much but Mang Mario, the owner, is a good man and pays fair wages. He might even give you a sleeping cot in the bakery. Would you like me to call him?"

Tonyo excitedly nodded his head several times. "While I do that, there's a bathroom down the hall and to the left. There will be some old clothes to change into after you take a shower."

CHAPTER 9



MANG MARIO AND D'FAVORITE BAKERY

Father Randy accompanied Tonyo to D' Favorite Bakery right around the corner from the church. He left Tonyo by the counter and went to the back of the store where all the baking was done. The smell of butter and sugar floated around the store and made Tonyo's mouth water. Already, they were baking tomorrow's bread. He pressed his nose against the glass panes and imagined how each bun would taste. The *monay's* sweetness would shake his teeth, the bits of coconut from the *coco* bread would tickle his palate and the cream filling of the donut would slide down his throat. Mmmmm.

"Is this the boy you were telling me about? When will you stop sending me runaways?"

MANG MARIO AND D'FAVORITE BAKERY

"Only when you stop losing your bread boys," answered Father Randy with a chuckle in his voice.

"At the rate he's drooling over my bread, I may have none to sell!" exclaimed Mang Mario, somewhat gruffly.

"Yes, that's Tonyo. But don't worry he'll work hard for every centavo and bun he eats," assured the priest.

"Very well," said the baker, looking straight at Tonyo with a frown on his face, "but if you misbehave, I'll throw you back out on the street!" Tonyo flinched but did not say a word. "You can start today. I'll show you your sleeping quarters." He took Tonyo by the shoulder but not before he turned to the priest. "I hope you're right about this one. I'll thank you later."

The priest only laughed and waved at Tonyo and the baker. "See you both at Mass!"

Father Randy always brought the street kids, who managed to wander into the church, to work for Mang Mario or for the other merchants around the neighborhood. Not many stayed very long. They always got into one scrape or another. Mang Mario was, as usual, one helper short. That stupid oaf Boyet had not only suddenly left but also disappeared with his Sony radio. That's what one

gets for trying to help people earn an honest living. Mang Mario thought to himself at that time.

The baker gave Tonyo a tiny room with a cot and nothing else in the storeroom behind the bakery where the flour, butter, sugar, and other ingredients were kept. From there, Tonyo could hear everything that went on in the kitchen or the shop, including the patter of little mice feet or that of a robber.

"I know how many cans of butter, sacks of flour and sugar I have at any given time, so don't try to steal any," growled Mang Mario.

On that first night, as he lay on his hard cot, and listened to the clatter of first rain on the roof, Tonyo thought of his mother. It had been a little over a year since he left Luaun to look for her and he was nowhere near finding her. Would he ever?

Even before Mang Mario arrived to roll up the steel bars of the bakery, Tonyo was ready for work. The baker lifted an eyebrow in surprise but said nothing and continued to frown. He took Tonyo to where the ovens and baking tables were located. "You're too scrawny to knead the dough, so your job will be to put the bread in the oven and take them out again when they are done. All you have to do is set the timer to forty five minutes or more every time, depending on the kind of bread it is.

You can read can't you?" Tonyo nodded his head. "Here's a chart you can follow. You might have to check the bread once in a while to see that the tops have not burned. This is how you do it." Mang Mario took a long metal reed and poked it into the buns and quickly pulled it out. "If there's some mix still stuck to it, then the bread needs a little more baking. If not, then the buns are done."

Tonyo quickly went to work. In the beginning, the ovens frightened him. He imagined them to be hiding tiny dragons that roared fire every time he opened the door. If he wasn't careful, he could burn his face and hands. He, in fact, had many burns on his hands and arms before he learned to handle the oven and bread shovel. Every evening, he took a cup of lard to his room and rubbed the soothing salve on the red welts all over his hands and arms. But Tonyo was a fast learner and in a matter of only a few weeks, he learned to shovel the bread into the oven without getting burned. The dragons were now his helpers. He arranged the buns in tight rows but with enough space in between to allow them to expand all the way to the back of the oven that he managed to bake them faster than the bakers could make them. The bakers were amazed. Mang Mario was impressed.

In the months that followed, Tonyo learned to mix the ingredients for *pan de sal*, *monay*, *coco* bread, and the other baked goodies the bakery sold. He did the work of two boys and Mang Mario paid him accordingly, just as Father Randy had said. Every Sunday after the noon Mass, where Tonyo served as altar boy for Father Randy, the baker thanked Father Randy for sending him Tonyo. He also doubled the supply of free bread that the parish distributed to those in need. He had never had such a hard working boy.

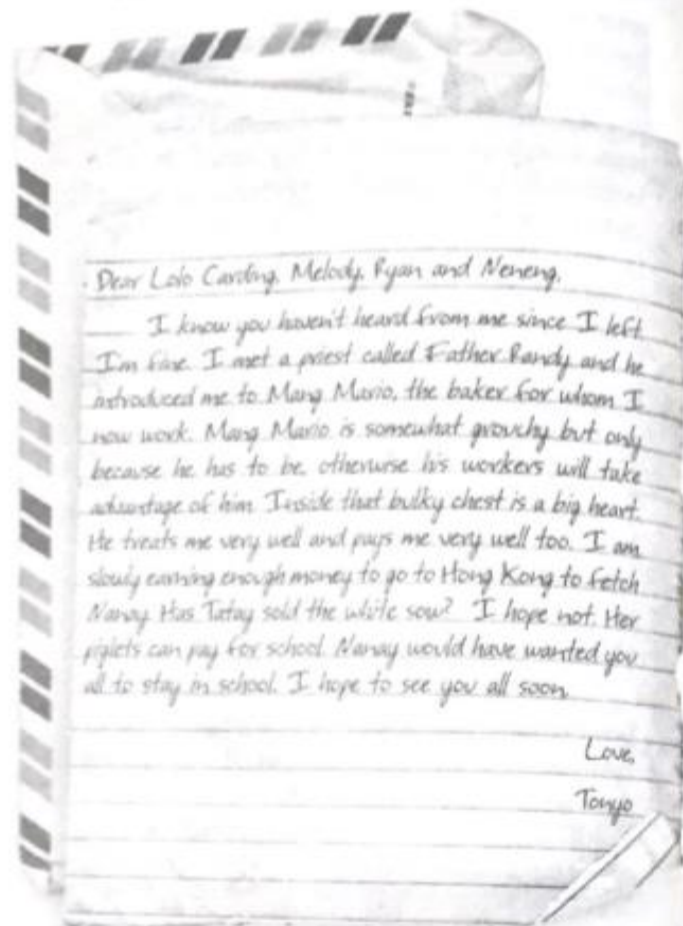
In no time, Tonyo had to look for something bigger to hide his money. He was going to make sure no one could steal it again. The money he earned from the gang activities he had dropped into the collection box a long time ago. The newly earned money was rolled in his only handkerchief in a tight bundle tied around his waist. It was beginning to show and made working a bit difficult. In the little room behind the bakery where Mang Mario let him sleep, there was no place where he could keep his money. Or was there?

Lying in bed, staring up at the ceiling and thinking of where to put his money, Tonyo caught a glimpse of a mouse scurrying along the wood beams. Taking the ladder from the bakery, he leaned it carefully against the rough walls of his

MANG MARIO AND D'FAVORITE BAKERY

room just below where he had seen the mouse cross. He knew mice usually traveled in a straight line. With his hands, he searched for the small hole where the mouse lived. As his fingers inched their way across the beam, they finally found what they were searching for. He quickly ran down the ladder and went to the bakery. There he rummaged about for something to keep his money safe from the little rodent's teeth and greedy appetite but small enough to fit into the hole. He finally found a small tin canister that once held the yeast to make the bread rise. The tin was soft enough to mold around the money but too hard for the mouse to chew into. Besides, since this little mouse was going to help him guard his money, he was going to feed it the delicious crumbs that littered the bakery. That would also keep him away from his money. That night, Tonyo tucked the canister into the mouse hole and a satisfied mouse came home to find a strange roommate.

With some of the money he earned, Tonyo bought himself another pair of pants, a t-shirt or two and some pad paper and pencil. For the first time since he left, he was going to write home. Lolo Carding and the kids must be terribly worried about him. Tatay probably hadn't even noticed he was gone.



MANG MARIO AND D'FAVORITE BAKERY

Tonyo had no intention of telling them about his misfortunes with the gang or of his having been caught stealing the church's collection. They would all be very disappointed with him. It was enough to let them know he was all right.

CHAPTER 10



LEAVE-TAKING

Tonyo continued to work for Mang Mario. There were days when Mang Mario would leave the bakery to play mahjong with the barber and his cronies across the street and leave the store in Tonyo's care. The clatter of tiles and the boisterous chatter carried all the way to the bakery. "It's been a long while since he last did that," commented Father Randy, who had come by to visit Tonyo and Mang Mario. "When Manang Espie was still alive, she minded the store when there was a mahjong session. It seems the Lord has finally sent the assistant he's been praying for. Aaah, the power of prayer." Father Randy continued, "None of his children care to live and work here. They all have fancy jobs in Makati and seldom come to visit their father. He misses them very much, especially his grandchildren."

LEAVE-TAKING

Mang Mario had watched the scrawny boy from the day he humbly walked into the bakery with Father Randy, to this day where he stood behind the counter manning the cash box. At first, he didn't give Tonyo much credit — said he would be like most boys that passed his way. When the work got too hard, they left for the streets again. But Tonyo stayed on, eager to learn and willing to do any job thrown at him. Mang Mario noticed the burns on Tonyo's hands and arms from the hot oven. He noticed how much weight Tonyo had put on when he ably kneaded the dough. He observed how polite and courteous he was with customers, and how much they liked him. He knew how well Tonyo saved his money, staying away from the many temptations the city had to offer and staying at the bakery to work or watch television when all the chores had been done.

The television had caught Tonyo in its electric grasp. When the bakery had closed and there was no more work to be done, he asked Mang Mario if he could watch the shows on the television Mang Mario had installed in the bakery to amuse himself and his customers. Mang Mario didn't mind. Tonyo deserved some sort of recreation, although he got enough exercise running around the bakery.

Tonyo watched every show possible and never missed any of the basketball games. He

enjoyed the commercials immensely, especially the one that had his favorite basketball hero in it. He missed the basketball games he and Fredo used to play with the other neighborhood boys back home. Tonyo was actually their team's sharp shooter. He wondered if they were winning their games. He hoped to be back home in time for the fiesta when the basketball tournaments began. He couldn't wait to play against the rival town's *Guapings* team and show that *mayabang* Lito just how much better he was at shooting that ball through the hoop.

He also liked the MTV Channel where those fast-talking girls and guys seemed to be having lots of fun. And the bands, boy, were they good! Maybe he would get a haircut like Chris of the Backstreet Boys. They had the same straight hair except his was black. And the wrestling. Boy, if he had only known those moves, he would have dumped Benny, Bugoy and Samboy into the stinky garbage cans a long time ago. Maybe he would teach Ryan the "jack hammer". So if their father went after him, Ryan would know how to defend himself. He really had to find his mother soon.

Mang Mario knew from Father Randy of Tonyo's plans to find his mother in Hong Kong. He never mentioned it to Tonyo and dreaded the day he would come up to him to tell him he was

leaving to continue his search for his mother. He paid Tonyo well and gave him a small bonus almost every month, hoping that would keep Tonyo happy for a long time. He spoke to Father Randy about his fear. "You know why he has to find his mother, don't you?" asked the priest.

Mang Mario nodded his round, balding head. "Maybe as a Christmas gift, I could invite him to stay with me at the house, he might give up his plan and stay with me for a while longer."

"That you could try," agreed the priest.

Mang Mario waited until everyone had gone home and they were closing shop to invite Tonyo. Tonyo couldn't believe he had just heard. His eyes had grown rounder and his jaw had dropped. He didn't know what to say to Mang Mario's offer to live with him in his apartment above the bakery as a guest and not as a houseboy. He would have his own room, that was once Mang Mario's son's, a nice bed with a real mattress, his own clean bathroom and best of all, his own colored television. He would not have to pay a centavo in rent and he would still have his job at the bakery. He felt giddy just thinking he could lie in his soft bed and watch television all night. What a great Christmas gift! And he didn't have anything for Mang Mario.

His mind pushed him to say yes immediately but his heart reminded him that he still had to bring Nanay home. Taking Mang Mario's offer would oblige him to stay at the bakery longer. His initial excitement suddenly changed into a somber thoughtfulness. "Think about it well before you give me an answer," advised Mang Mario, seeing how torn the boy was between what he should do and what he wanted to do.

That night, sitting at the edge of his hard cot, juggling the money-filled canister in his hands, Tonyo thought about what he should do. It occupied his thoughts so much that he could not concentrate on his favorite television show. He fell asleep holding the canister to his chest, still not knowing what to do.

In his sleep, he saw a tiny little Neneng, no bigger than his thumb, running away in terror from a giant hand. He saw Lolo Carding, dressed in a Santa Claus suit, running around in circles trying to catch Melody, who was falling from the sky. With the other hand, he was trying to grab at Ryan, who was being sucked by an unseen force. At the same time, poor Lolo Carding was running away from their speeding tricycle with only a laughing Neneng inside. Then he saw his mother, in a tight-collared Chinese dress, floating above the sea calling to him in a language he did not understand but that sounded much like Chinese. He saw Mang

Jun's giant face leering drunkenly at him, his sharp eyes staring at Tonyo. He woke up in fright when Mang Jun's face suddenly became Tatay's. Tonyo sat up and looked around him. He realized where he was and his breathing slowed down. He put his hand to his chest and felt his heart still beating very fast. He now knew what he had to do. He would wait till after the holidays to inform Mang Mario of his plans. Till then, he would enjoy the Christmas season.

With some of the money he had saved, he went on a shopping expedition at the nearby mall. Christmas carols played as crowds window-shopped and ogled at the brightly decorated stores. Children ran around excitedly wanting to buy everything in sight. Tonyo had no idea where to begin.

He entered a gaily-decorated store and bought Mang Mario a beautiful leather wallet. At a tool shop, he got Tatay a handy tool set and Father Randy, an all-weather flashlight. He would have wanted to buy Nanay that beautiful pearl necklace that hung on the window of a jewelry store like a Christmas ball, but how would he send it? Besides, she would only worry as to how he got the money. For Lolo Carding, he bought a pair of eyeglass frames to replace his old and mended ones. For Ryan, a fierce looking tiger that could transform into a robot. For Melody, a beauty set of

powder and cologne. And for Neneng a Barbie doll with a lovely pink gown and a brush for her hair. He would send this all through Dolfo who was going home for the holidays.

Mang Mario and Father Randy loved the gifts Tonyo had carefully wrapped and placed under Mang Mario's Christmas tree. After a sumptuous Christmas dinner with his family that included Tonyo and Father Randy, they all gathered around the tree and opened their gifts. Everyone had gifts for Tonyo. From Mang Mario he got a fairly expensive Walkman radio and from Father Randy he got a leather-bound notebook together with a sleek ball pen.

For the New Year celebration, Tonyo walked to his old haunt by the bay where he watched the splendid fireworks. He half-expected to bump into Benny, Samboy and Bugoy but didn't. Could they be in jail? Maybe they went home to their families. He wondered what his own family was doing. He had written his grandfather several letters who in turn had written him back. His grandfather informed him of his mother's constant questions about him and had taken to writing her letters as if they were from him. He also informed Tonyo that his father had not changed and so far, his mother did not know. Melody could not continue to go to school as not only did she have to take care of Neneng but Tatay's debts were also piling up.

Only Ryan was going to school now and if things didn't change, maybe even he would have to stop when the next school year began. Tonyo needed to find his mother.

The Christmas season was soon over and the time had finally come for Tonyo to tell Mang Mario of his plans. He tried to tell him over breakfast, before work at the bakery began. But Mang Mario was deep in thought. He tried to tell him at work but orders were piling up. He tried to tell him over lunch but Mang Mario was enjoying his favorite *lechong kawali*. He tried to tell him before the Angelus but Mrs. Buentipo, from down the block, had gone on about how she missed her children who were all abroad. By the time she left the store, the church bells had begun to peal. He tried to tell him as they closed shop but Mang Mario was busy telling him how he planned to renovate the bakery. The old baker had gone to bed and Tonyo had not told him yet.

Tonyo heard Mang Mario's snores through the door. He knocked softly, then a little louder until the snoring stopped and Mang Mario opened the door. "What is it boy? Has the bakery been robbed?"

"Nothing like that Mang Mario. I just need to speak to you."

Mang Mario took one look at the boy's glum face and he knew what he had to say. He listened as Tonyo told him of his plans. It was past midnight when the boy finished.

There were many things Mang Mario wanted to tell Tonyo but he held his counsel. He knew Tonyo would have to work it out his way.

Work at the bakery started at 4:00 in the morning, when almost everyone else was still asleep. The bread had to be ready before 6:00 when many of their regular customers came to pick up their freshly baked *pan de sal*. Tonyo had a few deliveries to make. The iron grills were heavy and had to be pushed to the sides.

Unlike the other shops beside his, Mang Mario had refused to change his doors to the grey iron gates that folded up or down in a jiffy. He said his old iron grills gave his shop character. Besides, they allowed passers-by to see his merchandise even if the shop was closed. Already Tonyo had been sweeping the store floor and rushed to help Mang Mario fold the grills. The old baker had gone around to check on the kitchen as the bakers arrived. He greeted each one of them and inquired about their families or their troubles. Most of the bakers had been with Mang Mario since the bakery opened. Some of the younger ones were children of now-retired bakers. Tonyo followed

Mang Mario to the back of the store where the bakers were getting ready to make the day's bread. He had begun to issue orders and Tonyo had to take his place behind the counter. He took out yesterday's bread and made space for today's bread. He cleaned the counters until they sparkled and made sure none of those pesky ants were about. He prepared to bring the day-old bread together with the parish's regular supply of *pan de sal* to the church where Father Randy would make sure the bread was fed to the street children and homeless people that regularly dropped by the parish for some sustenance. He needed to tell Father Randy of his plans.

Even before Tonyo brought it up, Father Randy already knew of his decision. The young boy had not gone through all that he had to give up now. Not this one. He could have saved Mang Mario the trouble and disappointment by telling him so but he had to give Tonyo the chance to live a better life. He knew it had been a hard decision to make, but he was proud that Tonyo had chosen to continue his search for his mother. "Don't worry, Mang Mario understands. You know you can always come back and get your old job back," assured the priest. "But how are you going to get yourself to Hong Kong?" Tonyo gave the priest a sly smile and brought out his canister. Many of the dents had filled out. From the canister he

brought out a fat wad of money. "I have enough here to buy passage in one of those big ships sitting on the bay," beamed Tonyo. "One of them is sure to pass by Hong Kong." Father Randy gave Tonyo a heavy pat on the back. "Congratulations son, your mission is almost over."

At the bakery the next morning, the bakers and customers noticed Mang Mario behind the counter. Tonyo was nowhere to be seen. "Is he sick?" inquired the head baker. "Has he gone back to the streets?" asked Mrs. Buentipo.

"No," answered Mang Mario despondently, "he has gone to look for his mother."

CHAPTER 11



STOWAWAY

Tonyo reached the busy, buzzing port just as the city began to heat up. There was a lot of activity already going on. The smell of rotting fish and garbage pervaded the whole place. The dock workers reminded Tonyo of worker ants trudging up their mounds with crumbs and scraps on their back.

He approached the nearest loading crew and asked which boat was going to Hong Kong. Several men, already shirtless and sweaty, pointed to a large rusty ship at the end of the wharf. Tonyo headed straight for it while skirting around piles of rope, heaps of boxes and crates, forklifts and people. The ship loomed massive and frightening as he came closer to it. End to end, it was probably as long as ten basketball courts and as high as a four-storey building. He began to search for the ship's captain. A man in a captain's uniform with

pasty yellow skin and creaseless eyes was standing on the upper deck intently observing the activity below deck. Tractors and men were loading large crates, big enough to house a small family, into the bowels of the ship. As Tonyo climbed the plank that led to the ship's interior, a gruff-looking unshaven sailor stopped him. "What do you want?" he grunted.

"I . . . I . . . just want to speak to the captain," stammered Tonyo.

"About what?"

"About going to Hong Kong."

The sailor laughed so hard, spit drizzled from his mouth.

"And how," he asked in between laughter, "are you going to pay for your fare?"

"I have enough money," answered Tonyo.

"Show me!" insisted the sailor, extending an open palm at Tonyo. Tonyo had had enough experience to know that this man was up to no good.

"Never mind," answered Tonyo and walked away. The sailor made to grab him but Tonyo was much faster and whipped around and ran behind the sailor.

"Stop!" shouted the sailor. "When I catch you, I'm going to kill you!" Tonyo ignored the sailor's threats. He figured the ship would be similarly laid out as the *MV Doña Corazon* and knew where to go. He ran up the stairs he knew would lead him to the Captain.

The Captain turned around immediately upon hearing the commotion below.

"Where you from?" he asked in surprise.

"Sir, I just wanted to buy passage to Hong Kong," blurted Tonyo. "To see my mother," he added.

The Captain looked sharply at Tonyo. "You have passport?" he asked. Tonyo shook his head. A small but important detail he had forgotten. "Get one and if we still here when you get back, you sail with us. I don't want authorities in boat looking for stowaway."

"But sir, I need to leave right away," pleaded Tonyo.

"No way. Now get out before I call sailor you get away from to throw you into sea. I'm sure he be happy to do it."

Tonyo left the boat very disappointed, but not without taking a good look at the dark gaping hole below him just waiting to be filled.

"Psst! Psst!"

Tonyo turned around to see the same sailor who wanted to kill him motioning to him behind some crates. Tonyo didn't budge. Just like Mang Jun, one didn't fool around with this guy. "Psst! Come here. I can help you." Tonyo looked at the sailor again. He didn't seem so scary and he looked like he really wanted to help.

Tonyo approached the sailor cautiously. When he was about an arm's length away, he asked, "How can you help me?"

"I heard your conversation with our *Instik* captain. I can sneak you in on our boat and I can sneak you out in Hong Kong. For a fee, of course."

"How much do you want?" asked Tonyo.

"Ten thousand pesos to sneak you on the boat and another ten to sneak you out." Tonyo swallowed hard and mumbled, "I don't have that kind of money," and turned to leave.

"No, no wait!" said the sailor. "Okay, okay five, five."

"Too much."

"Okay, okay this is my last offer, six thousand. But don't expect anything else."

"Five," said Tonyo. "Just make sure the captain doesn't see me and throw me overboard."

"Okay, okay, leave it to me," boasted the sailor. "In two nights you'll be in Hong Kong. Be here as soon as it gets dark. We sail as soon as the tide is up. Hand me the money."

"No way," said Tonyo. I give you half the money when I'm in and the rest when I'm out."

"Smart kid," muttered the sailor. "Okay, okay. See you tonight."

Tonyo hung around the pier until sundown. He stayed away from the boat in case the captain saw him and got suspicious. He bought some sandwiches and a bottle of water to tide him over the long trip and packed them with the clothes he had packed in the knapsack from Nanay that somehow managed to stay with him through all his misadventures. He prayed the sailor would not let him down.

When it was time, Tonyo walked towards the ship. The grubby sailor was there. As soon as he saw Tonyo, he herded him and brought him below deck. Tonyo found himself in one of the cargo holds of the ship, where wooden crates of different sizes were packed and stacked. There were no portholes and only one bulb to light the hold. "I will leave the door slightly open so you can breathe. Do not move around so much. You never know when the captain will be walking around and come by here. Before we leave, the captain will

order a search. Hide behind that large crate over there at the end. There should be enough space for a skinny kid like you. Now, give me the money." Tonyo slipped behind the nearest crate and took out the money belt from inside his shirt. Mang Mario had given him a leather money belt as a going-away present. He counted two thousand five hundred pesos. He counted again. And again, just to make sure. He tied the money belt around his waist and tucked his shirt tightly around it. He handed the money over to the sailor who said, "I will come down for you again as soon as we dock."

As the light from the outside disappeared with the sailor, Tonyo held in his stomach in fear. A few minutes passed before he could pull out his small flashlight from deep inside his knapsack. He had bought one to replace the one Benny stole from him. He cast its beam of light around the cargo hold that was as long and wide as the cathedral in Culasi. Every space was occupied — not even rats, that liked to live in ships, had room in this hold. There was hardly any air. He walked towards the crate the sailor had indicated. What if the sailor had fooled him? He had no choice. He would just have to hope everything would turn out all right. Tonyo removed his backpack and squeezed his body into the empty space between the ship wall and the crate. Either the sailor had overestimated the size of the space or had

underestimated his size. Just when Tonyo thought he couldn't hold in his stomach in any longer, he popped into a wide corner. At that instant, he heard muffled footsteps. He pulled his backpack in with him. The cabin search had begun. He crouched as close to the shadows as he could and kept very still. He tried to slow down his breathing. Except for the sound of the footsteps getting louder and nearer, not a sound could be heard. Tonyo shut his eyes tight and began to pray silently. "Dear God, please don't let them find me. Please don't let them find me." He could hear the ragged breathing of the sailors. "Please don't let them find me."

"Looks like another trip without a stow-away."

"Let's get out of here, my brains are ready to pop in this heat."

Tonyo listened until he could no longer hear their footsteps. Only then did he let out his breath. He took large gulps of air as sweat rolled down from his head onto his back and down his face. The sailors had closed the door behind them. He prayed the sailor would come down and open the door again. Otherwise, he would suffocate. There was no way he could open it from the inside.

Tonyo eased himself out from behind the crate. He knew enough from his science class that to conserve air, he would have to move as little as

possible. He hung his backpack on his back and walked very slowly towards the closed door. Maybe if he sat by the door, he could catch some of the air that managed to slip through the jamb.

He had fallen asleep with his head against the door when he was awakened by dull thuds against the heavy steel door. Where could he hide? Before Tonyo could make a move, the door opened. Tonyo pinned himself against the ship wall. He could feel every object in his backpack press against his back. No one came in but the door remained a crack open. Tonyo heard retreating footsteps and heaved a sigh a relief. So far, the sailor had come through.

Tonyo chose to sit on the crate nearest the door, where he could feel a slight breeze and smell the ocean. A piece of the crate was broken and stuck out. He broke it off further and planted it between the door and the jamb. At least, no one would accidentally close the door and leave him trapped and without air inside the hold without some difficulty. Through the crack in the door, he could see a bit of the evening sky. How he longed to be on deck watching the stars. Would he see the North Star or Sirius, the Dog Star?

The trip was generally uneventful after that first harrowing night, although Tonyo kept one ear always cocked to the sounds outside, even when he had fallen asleep. Many times he heard heavy footsteps outside but they eventually passed. The sailor came by once on the next night to check on him. The next time he came by was to tell Tonyo to get ready to leave. They had reached Hong Kong.

CHAPTER 12



HONG KONG

“You must jump overboard the instant the ship touches the dock while the captain and all the other sailors are busy and before the customs and immigration inspectors come,” he said as he pulled Tonyo out of the hold to the side of the ship.

“Jump!” exclaimed Tonyo as he looked down.

“Yes,” said the sailor. “From this side to the pier below. You have to take advantage of the dark and all the noise and activity otherwise you will get caught. Give me the rest of my money.”

“Let go of me so I can get my money.”

“No way. Give me the money and I’ll let you go.”

With his free arm, Tonyo took the money from his money belt and gave it to the sailor. He

HONG KONG

didn’t have enough time to count it again. The sailor grabbed the cash and gave him a push. “Jump now or you’ll get caught!”

Without hesitating, Tonyo leaped over the ship’s railing and fell fifteen feet into the dark water. The cold water grabbed him and clutched at his heart. He held his breath and kept his eyes closed until he felt himself shoot up like a bullet. He opened his eyes and gasped for air. He looked around to get his bearings. He was under the shadow of the ship. No one had heard his splash. He began to swim hurriedly towards the huge pylons under the wharf. He shimmied up the one nearest the port, aided by the barnacles that clustered around the pole. The bright light from the spotlights that lit the container port blinded him momentarily as his face came up the wharf. He kept very still until his eyes had gotten used to the lights. He looked around him quickly. There was a large empty van parked in front of rows of containers stacked like toy blocks several feet away. He made sure no one would see him before he scrambled up and dashed for the van. He stopped several times behind the stacks of crates to catch his breath and to make sure no one had seen him. The shadows and grooves of steel containers hid him from curious eyes. A loud crunch of steel teeth above him startled Tonyo. He looked up to see a tall crane dig its large hooks into the topmost

container, lift it and drop it gently on a waiting container van. He changed direction and made for the vehicle. Only when he was behind it did he realize he didn't know where he was going. He looked around the port and saw that it was many times larger than the one in Manila. Rows of containers, neatly stacked four to six high under cranes as tall as buildings, stretched for miles. The vans that wove in and around the containers seemed like toys. He also noticed that there were some guards, conspicuous in their uniforms, patrolling the area. That was the one thing he had forgotten to ask the sailor about — the location of the exit. He would have to find one and try to slip out unnoticed.

As he passed water behind the van, Tonyo's eye caught a stab of light. He peeped from behind the van to catch the reflection of the rising sun on the sky-scraping buildings across the bay. He stared in awe at the island that twinkled before him. A sharp whistle broke his reverie. He quickly crawled behind the large wheel of the van. The smell of burnt rubber stormed his nostrils. He waited, crouched low like a crab, until the sound of running feet passed. It was not him they were after. He tried to ignore the stench of rubber and oil. It was only a matter of time before this van would leave the port. Tonyo felt a rush of energy go through his body. Now he knew where he was

going and what he needed to do. All the time, the sound of footsteps and muffled voices speaking in a language he could not understand surrounded him. He tried not to let it frighten him.

For the first time, he looked up at the underside of the van. It was high enough from the ground not to get scraped on the road as it moved. But how could he cling to the underside of the van as it moved? As he pondered on what to do next, his eye caught what looked like a bundle of rags stuffed in between the many rods that made up the chassis. Tonyo pulled it out and realized it was a homemade hammock. What was it doing underneath the truck? Then Tonyo remembered. While roaming the pier in Manila, waiting for the right time to stow away on the ship bound for Hong Kong, he noticed how the drivers of the many trucks, lined up on the pier waiting for cargo, hung these hammocks underneath the truck to sleep in. How he wished he had looked under those trucks had he known this would happen to him.

Scenes of Hollywood movie getaways popped into Tonyo's head. How did Mel Gibson in that movie manage to escape the bad guys? Didn't he stow away beneath the truck? He checked the truck's chassis. Possible. He heard footsteps getting louder and coming closer. He quickly hung the hammock, jumped into it, and rolled himself into a tight cocoon. He heard the door of the van

creak open. The driver yelled out something and banged the door.

With only his hands sticking out, Tonyo pulled himself up in between the bottom of the truck bed and the chassis so that he wouldn't hang so much in case the port guards inspected the underbelly of the truck. He would look just like a hammock someone forgot to tuck in properly. He heard the motor rev. It shook the whole truck. It shook Tonyo to his teeth. He felt the truck move then stop, the motor still on, the wail of the air brakes filling his ears. Were they at the gate? He heard voices. He couldn't understand what they were saying. Had the port guards found him? He heard a voice come nearer. What would they do with him? Would they beat him up and throw him into the sea to drown and be eaten by sharks? Or would they haul him off to jail and send him back home on the first boat? The voice was right above him. Maybe they would just shoot him on sight. The motor revved again, the truck heaved and they were moving. They were leaving the port and headed for an unknown destination. Tonyo let out a sigh that left his lungs empty. The need to sleep suddenly descended over him and he was out like a knocked-out boxer.

He woke up when the truck screeched to a halt. He waited to hear other things that would give him a clue as to where he was. He heard the roar of many trucks and above it the sound of men shouting in that strange language his ears were becoming used to. Then he felt the truck lurch and move slowly. It stopped with another screech at the same time Tonyo felt it bump against something. Time to get off. Tonyo rolled off the hammock. Already he missed the security it had given him. He dashed out from under the truck and found himself face to chest with a burly Cantonese man. The hulk grabbed him by the collar and began to holler. "He's probably calling the police!" thought Tonyo. "I have to try and get away!" Tonyo wiggled and squirmed in the man's grip but it was as tight as that of a crocodile with fish in its mouth. "Let me go! Let me go!" Tonyo screamed.

"Pilipino eh," sneered the giant.

The commotion lured the other workers from their work. They surrounded the pair and surprisingly began to cheer for the young Filipino boy struggling with the giant Cantonese. They placed bets on who would finally prevail. "My brother!" shouted a voice above the din. As suddenly as it had erupted, the commotion stopped. Into the circle stepped a man of medium build, black hair and dark skin. "Pinoy!" thought

Tonyo triumphantly. The man rushed to Tonyo and hugged him. "You have finally come! Wok, where did you find my brother?"

"He come out under truck. He run but I catch. Bring to police."

"Okay *la*. I bring him to police. You go back to work."

"*M'tak*. He not your brother. He stowaway," the Chinese man said as he dragged Tonyo towards the guardhouse.

"But he my brother," the Filipino insisted. "I pay you the money."

Wok stopped. With one hand still gripping Tonyo's collar, he opened the other palm up and brought the four fingers straight up in a fanning motion. "You pay now."

"I have no money now Wok. You know we not yet paid."

"No money, no brother," the Chinese man said and continued walking.

"But he my baby brother!" the Pinoy said as he hugged Tonyo again. In Tonyo's ear he whispered, "Don't say a word." In a loud voice he said, "*Mm goi*, Wok, my mother die if she find out little brother in jail and she curse you to dung-eaters' hell when you die."

The man stopped. "Okay, you pay me two hundred dollar pay day." "Here, take little brother," and he pushed Tonyo into the arms of the Pinoy.

"C'mon before the guards bother to come out. Luckily, fist fights are common around here and the guards often ignore them." With his arms protectively around Tonyo's shoulders, the Pinoy led him to a locker room that was above one of the warehouses. The low ceiling and tiny windows kept the heat and the smell of stale sweat hanging in the air. "Stay here until I finish work in a few hours," he ordered Tonyo. "Don't go out or roam around. If the guards catch you, I won't be able to bail you out. As it is, I already owe that giant Wok two hundred dollars."

As the Pinoy scampered down the aluminum stairs Tonyo heaved a heavy sigh. Would this be his lot in life — waiting for things to happen from tight, airless spaces without food? But he knew that since he left home he had been saved from jail twice. Both times he knew he had broken the law and would somehow have to pay for it in some way. If this was one way he could pay his debts, then he would suffer it gladly. But would he ever find his mother? Already, he was so close. How would he pay this Pinoy who was sure to ask him to pay him the two hundred dollars. How much was two hundred dollars in pesos? Did he have

enough money? The amount he had paid the sailor had left his pouch almost empty.

Time seemed to go so slowly for Tonyo as he waited for the Pinoy to come back for him. He no longer heard the music from his Walkman. The grimy clock that hung on the wall didn't seem to work. Its hands hardly moved. He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten and his hunger was eating through his stomach. There was a thud in his brain that grew louder as it filled his head. Everything in the room began to move and then to blur. Tonyo shut his eyes tight.

"Wake up boy!" a frantic voice pierced the fog in his brain. "Are you alright?" Tonyo opened his eyes to see the blurry figure of the Pinoy bending over him, his worried face very close to Tonyo's. He put his hand to cheeks that were burning. "Sorry boy, but when I came back you were sprawled on the floor. I had to slap you a bit to wake you up. You had fainted. Must be the hunger and fatigue from such a trip. C'mon, let's get some food."

The Pinoy half-dragged Tonyo down the stairs and out the warehouse complex. Tonyo's legs felt as limp as jelly, his head as heavy as a ship's anchor.

"Hey Jimmy! How's little brother *la*?" yelled a familiar voice.

"Not so good Wok. Very weak," answered the Pinoy who now had a name. "Need food."

"I help you take him to Cho's apartment."

"*Do tse* Wok," said Jimmy.

Tonyo felt himself being lifted and cradled in massive arms. Deep in his hazy dream, he knew who was carrying him, yet he felt comforted.

More of the same piercing chatter filled Tonyo's head. Where was he? Was he still under the truck? Suddenly, his mouth was filled with hot soup that slid easily into his throat. It burned his tongue and bit him out of his stupor. The spicy taste lingered in his mouth. He wanted more and left his mouth open. As more soup slid down his throat and into his empty stomach, Tonyo began to wake from his dreamless sleep.

He opened his eyes to a white splotchy ceiling with only a bare bulb, the light of which hurt his eyes. He put his hand over his eyes and instinctively, let out a low moan. "*Kamusta ka na?*" inquired a voice. At the sound of a familiar language, Tonyo brought his arm down. It was the Pinoy who had earlier saved him from the powerful grip of the Chinese giant and the clutches of the warehouse guards. Didn't he hear

somewhere that his name was Jimmy? "Boy, *kamusta ka na?*" repeated the Pinoy. Tonyo nodded his head to indicate he was okay but the sharp pain that pierced his head like a thousand needles made him wince and hold his head. "Here, drink this. It'll make the pain go away." Tonyo lifted his heavy head from the pillow. A pill was pushed into his mouth and the lip of a glass inserted between his lips. He felt the pill scrape his throat as it went down with the water and coughed a bit. He closed his eyes again.

He is drowning. Tonyo knows he is drowning. The salty seawater has entered his nose and is rapidly filling his lungs. The sharp pain in his chest as his lungs are about to burst is unbearable. "But wasn't I drowning?" he thinks as he looks down at the concrete pavement rushing below him. The pain in his lungs has disappeared but it has transferred to his hands that are clenched around the chassis of a truck. Only inches separate him from the deathly road. Tonyo cannot feel his hands. He watches in fright as his fingers slip off the chassis one by one. He tries to hold on but he seems to have no control over his fingers. The truck is going faster. His hands no longer hold onto the chassis. Tonyo is floating, cradled in massive arms. "Tatay?" "Nanay?"

"No," a voice growled, "only Wok."

Tonyo woke up to the sound of motorcycles buzzing below, competing with the shouts of hawkers selling warm bean curd and hot radish cakes. He looked up at the same splotchy ceiling. The pain in his head had disappeared, as did the one in his stomach. He sank lower into the soft mattress under him. Maybe today, he would stay in it the whole day.

"Looks like you finally woke up!" a familiar voice called from the other end of the room. Tonyo raised his head a bit to see the Pinoy standing by the door. "Ready for a real meal?" he asked. The mention of food brought the saliva rushing into Tonyo's dry mouth. All resolve to stay glued to the mattress the whole day disappeared. He nodded his head vigorously, a sign that the medicine and a good night's sleep had done its work.

In two strides, the Pinoy was right beside Tonyo's mattress, helping him to rise. "Boy," he said crinkling up his nose, "you need a bath." Tonyo gave him a shy smile while agreeing with him wholeheartedly. "Here, I pulled these out from your knapsack," he said as he shoved a pair of pants, a t-shirt and a toothbrush at Tonyo while holding the knapsack in his other hand. Tonyo immediately put his hand on his stomach. Was his money belt still around him? The Pinoy noticed the abrupt movement and said, "Don't worry. Your money belt is intact. It's right beside the mattress."

As far as he could tell, his money was all there. "Count it." Tonyo turned his back on the man and counted his money. He made quick calculations in his head. It was all there. Thank goodness Madam Letty had drilled him constantly with Math problems. At the memory of home, Tonyo felt some tears begin to well up behind his eyes.

"Feeling better now?"

Tonyo swallowed the tears away and turned around to face the Pinoy again. "They're not as clean either but they're not as dirty as the ones you have on," he continued, still holding Tonyo's pants and t-shirt in his hands. "The bathroom is down the hall. Should the water from the shower run out, use the water in the plastic pail. Here's a towel and some soap. Now go get a shower before we go out to eat," he ordered. "O, might as well wash what you're wearing, he added as he threw Tonyo's clothes at him. "You'll find laundry soap in the can under the sink."

Tonyo was just as eager to have a bath. He trotted down the hallway into the bathroom at the end. It was obvious it was shared by many and was surprisingly clean and dry, although many tiles were missing from the floors and walls. Hanging above the bath area, on wire strung from one end of a wall to the other, were towels of different

colors and sizes, a pair of socks and some underwear.

Tonyo wondered who else were living in this building. Were there more Filipinos? As he undressed, Tonyo noticed that the water closet was located above the seat. To flush, he would have to reach up and pull a chain. As long as it worked, he thought as he jumped into the shower stall. The first rush of cold water that tumbled onto his naked body was like a jolt of electricity. But in seconds, it had transformed into a refreshing, purifying experience.

Tonyo scrubbed himself vigorously until his skin tingled. He borrowed liberally from the shampoo bottles that lined the ledge of the shower stall like beauty queens on a stage, and dug his fingers into his hair, shampooing his hair until each and every strand squeaked. He washed his soiled clothes with just as much vigor and hung them on the laundry line. He took a bit of toothpaste from the many strewn around the sink and brushed his teeth with the toothbrush that he had brought in his knapsack. It was the first time he looked into a mirror in quite a while. He had lost the weight he had gained at the bakery and was as thin as when he had first left Lauan, but he still had all the muscle he built up. He also noticed tiny soft hair around his lip. He caressed it with his

fingertip. "Hmmm." Would he shave it or let it grow just like the Pinoy's?

When he walked out of the bathroom, he felt like a new person — his worn and tattered skin washed down the sewer. It didn't matter that his t-shirt still held the slight smell of rotten fish.

"Hey, boy. You smell like a shop-full of flowers. Did you go through the bottles of shampoo?" the Pinoy asked. Tonyo nodded shyly. "That's okay, the guys won't know. So let's go get something to eat before you faint on me again. By the way, my name is Jimmy. Jimmy Cabrera. What's yours?"

Tonyo felt like he had known this *kababayan* but complete stranger since forever. He knew down to the pit of his stomach that he had made another friend. He wondered how Mang Mario and Father Randy were doing?

"My name is Tonyo Peralta. Thank you for saving me from that large Chinese," croaked Tonyo who had not spoken for some time.

"That large Chinese is actually a nice guy. He carried you all the way here when you had fainted. He just needs money to support his mother and a dozen other sisters, brothers, in-laws, nieces and nephews."

"I'll pay you back the amount you owe him," promised Tonyo quickly.

"Don't worry. I would have eventually charged you anyway. I need money too you know. Hong Kong isn't a cheap place to live in."

As they were coming down the stairs, a middle-aged man in a *sando*, loose mud-colored pants, and closed slippers accosted them. He spoke in that strange high-pitched language. He kept pointing at Tonyo and sounded angry. "No worry. No worry, Mr. Cho," the Pinoy said as he put one hand on Tonyo's shoulder. "He my baby brother, *la*. Short time only. Then go home," Jimmy explained to his landlord, in the broken English they all seemed to understand. His landlord continued to chatter even as he turned around and went to where it was he had popped up from.

As soon as they stepped out of the building, the distinctive smell of overflowing sewers, garbage, fried food and incense attacked Tonyo's nostrils. It told him instantly that he was in another city, much like Manila but in many ways, different. As he and Jimmy spoke, he looked at his new surroundings. The building they had stepped out from was just like the many that lined the narrow street. Every single balcony, seven stories up, had laundry that hung from one end of the

street to the other. Some had potted plants in different stages of life; others had odds and ends that no longer fit into the tiny apartments, like an old sewing machine or an unwanted stuffed toy. The buildings were old and had obviously seen better days. The white paint on most was peeling in pieces thick with dirt and dust like old skin. Many of the windows were broken or gone and substituted with plastic or plywood. But the ground floors of the tenements were occupied by optical shops or Chinese drug stores or clothes shops or appliance stores or noodle houses or fruit and vegetable stands that overflowed onto the sidewalk. Compact cars were parked along the street. Traffic was such that the minute one car left, another immediately took its place. Tonyo noticed that the drivers sat on the right side of the car.

Tonyo felt crowded in — even the sky seemed too close. He longed for the open fields of Lauan.

"Hey — Who or what are you running away from?" Jimmy asked.

The question jolted Tonyo from his observations. "Mmm . . . Ahhh . . ." mumbled Tonyo.

Jimmy didn't push. They walked on.

"I'm looking for my mother," blurted Tonyo as they passed a stereo shop. "She came here to

work more than a year ago. I meant to find her sooner but needed to earn money first."

"Do you have her address?" asked Jimmy.

Tonyo shook his head. "That got lost when some street kids ganged up on me and stole the money I had saved from the province. What day is it?"

"Friday. Sounds like you have a long story to tell. Want to tell me?" pushed Jimmy as they walked into a small, crowded noodle house. There was no response from Tonyo.

"So I guess your Mom doesn't know you're here in Hong Kong?"

"No," answered Tonyo as the smell of pork being sautéed passed under his nose. A week had passed since he had left Manila on the boat.

They sat around a greasy formica table, on which a careless waitress had left a few oily streaks.

"Let's order some *congee* first before you tell me more."

With a flick of his hand and a few Cantonese words, Jimmy ordered two full bowls of boiled wet rice with pork, chicken, and century egg buried in it, topped with sprinklings of spring onion and garlic. Most everybody seemed to know

Jimmy — from the waitress who took his order to the man screaming and ordering everybody around behind the counter, who paused between what sounded like swear words, to wave at Jimmy. As soon as the bowls arrived, Tonyo took the white porcelain bean-shaped spoon and dipped it into the piping hot soup. He stuck the spoon into his mouth much to his regret. He covered his mouth with both hands and turned a burning red. His eyes watered over and he began to cough violently.

"Are you okay?" Jimmy asked as he gave Tonyo two solid pats on the back that made Tonyo lurch each time. "I know you must be starving but wait for it to cool down a bit. The Cantonese like their *congee* so hot, it'll burn even a devil's tongue."

Tonyo wolfed down two full bowls of *congee* before he declared himself full. He failed to notice the grimy walls and the filthy floor that was a sure magnet for rats and roaches. In between spoonfuls, he answered Jimmy's questions without giving too many details. Unlike with Father Randy, Tonyo had no desire to spill his story for the expatriate Pinoy. But by the end of lunch, Jimmy had an idea of Tonyo's misfortunes, although he knew the boy was holding back.

"I don't know why I want to help you, boy. Maybe it's because I need as many graces as I can

get from up there," he indicated with his eyebrows. "We can't start looking for your mother till Sunday, which is my day off. In the meantime, you can't be conspicuous. Filipino children are a rarity in Hong Kong and the immigration police here are very strict and have eyes like eagles and ears like bats. While I'm at work, stay in the apartment. My landlord thinks you're my younger brother come to visit for a few days. He doesn't speak any English, the cranky old Cantonese, so stay out of his way. He's capable of calling the police to come pick you up."

"I can take care of myself and I'd like to start looking for my mother if I can. I don't know how long my money will last."

"Are you crazy, boy? You don't even have her address! Are you thinking of knocking in every apartment building? Just look down this street, there are apartments all the way to the warehouses, each one with at least seven floors and fourteen doors! Wait till Sunday, like I said. That's when all the Filipino maids converge on Statue Square. If we don't find her there, we can ask any of them. One of them might know her or at least have heard of her. In the meantime, stay in my room. Get some more rest. You'll need it when we start looking."

"Why are you helping me? I'm only trouble for you."

"Let's just say I'm paying back an old debt. So, stay in my room. Keep the door locked. Be as quiet as possible. Watch TV, play cards, clean up the place. Hey, and don't try to run away with any of my things. Like I said, the landlord has eyes like an eagle and ears like a bat.

"Here, my leftovers from breakfast," were Jimmy's parting words as he shoved the brown paper bag at Tonyo's stomach.

"I don't think I'd want to get on this guy's bad side," thought Tonyo. "If he can handle someone like the giant Chinese guy, then he must be pretty tough."

As soon as he got into Jimmy's room, Tonyo turned the television on. If only they could afford one back home. "I wonder how they're doing?" he thought. Had his father changed? It was useless to speculate. He knew nothing about them since he left Manila. "Maybe I should write to them again now that I'm finally in Hong Kong." "*—(Sound of breaking glass) The Rattlesnake is in the house — Listen to this crowd cheer! — What a guy! — . . . and the Undertaker is stunned —*" Tonyo was snatched and netted. The letter would have to wait.

"Hey boy, how long have you been watching TV?" asked Jimmy as he stepped into the apartment.

"Huh! Ah . . . Ah . . ." Tonyo had fallen asleep five minutes into the Chinese soap opera. "I don't know. What time is it?"

"The day's over, can't you see?"

Tonyo looked out the window. It was dark outside.

"C'mon, get off your butt and get us some plates, spoons and forks and glasses from above the sink over there. I brought us our dinner."

"I must have fallen asleep after watching the news. You've got great television programs here. Although a lot of Chinese shows pop up once in a while," jabbered Tonyo as he moved around the small kitchenette in Jimmy's room.

"Get one more set. And put the food in nice plates. We're having a visitor," announced Jimmy as Tonyo set the table with plastic forks, spoons, plates and glasses. "No, not the plastic ones — the nice ones and bring out the real glasses. Don't break them, they're the only ones I have." Tonyo's eyebrows shot up and his mouth opened in mild surprise. Jimmy noticed. "She might be able to help us find your mother. She knows a lot of people in Hong Kong. Wash up and comb your hair before she gets here. You want to look presentable."

CHAPTER 13



ATE LORNA

At exactly 8:00 p.m., there was a slight knock on the door. At first, both Jimmy and Tonyo weren't sure they had heard it but another, louder knock assured them that their visitor had arrived. Jimmy rushed to open the door. In came a bird-like woman, dressed in a smart suit. Tonyo had never seen anyone look so pretty. She would have been lost in a crowd because of her size, but her effect on Jimmy was amazing. She was as tall as Tonyo with a face so tiny that it could fit into Jimmy's open palm. In her hand she held a brown paper bag. Jimmy took it and handed it to Tonyo, his eyes never leaving her face, even as he introduced them. "Lorna, Tonyo. Tonyo, Lorna."

"Hello Tonyo," she said in a voice that Tonyo wasn't sure he heard. How could this girl possibly help him?

ATE LORNA

"Hello Ma'am." The bag was hot and Tonyo figured it was more food.

"How was work?" asked Jimmy.

"Busy, as usual. We just had a new shipment of clothes from Milan."

Tonyo watched Jimmy as he poured the food she had bought into a dish. In her presence, Jimmy had transformed into mush and Tonyo could see why. Lorna's small brown face held eyes that reminded Tonyo of the small *sigay* shells he found at the beach, a tiny, flat nose and a small mouth. Her teeth were sparkling white that made her endless smile even more engaging. But what was most amazing about her was her flawless, velvet skin. It glowed golden brown even in the artificial light. No wonder Jimmy looked as if he was eager to hold her. He kept his distance but clearly made himself available to her every need. "Do you want a Coke?" he cooed. "Or maybe a beer?"

"Maybe a Coke later."

"Tonyo," she called. He didn't hear her.

"Tonyo, she's calling you," repeated Jimmy. Tonyo went to sit beside her on the folding stool that Jimmy had borrowed from next door. "Jimmy tells me you stowed away from Manila and that you're looking for your mother but you don't know

where she lives?" she asked as she tucked one side of her chin-length hair behind her ears.

"Yes Ma'am," said Tonyo as he nodded in agreement.

"What's your mother's name?"

"Lydia. Lydia Peralta, Ma'am."

"Don't call me Ma'am *naman*. Only my students called me that. Call me Ate Lorna." Just like his mother, Ate Lorna had been a teacher too.

She tucked the other side of her hair as she thought before she said. "No, I don't know her. But don't worry, between Jimmy and I, we'll be able to find her. All the Pinoys here know each other one way or another. I'll ask around the other boutiques at the Prince Building where I work. Jimmy will also make inquiries and on Sunday, we go to Statue Square. Where are you from?"

"From Lauan, Antique."

"I'm from Mindanao, Cagayan de Oro to be exact."

"You should hear his story. The little I know of it is already quite amazing. This boy is really determined to find his mother," Jimmy butted in.

"And I'm sure he will," added Lorna as she looked at Tonyo to reassure him.

I would do anything for this woman, Tonyo thought to himself, as he sighed audibly.

"And I'm sure you'll tell us your story when you're ready."

"C'mon guys, let's eat! I'm starved," invited Jimmy.

"I think I'll have that Coke now."

Jimmy and Tonyo raced for the bottle. Tonyo got it first but Jimmy grabbed it from him and said, "I'll do it."

Over a delicious dinner of sweet and sour pork and fried noodles that Jimmy had brought and the steamed fish Lorna had added and the newly cooked rice, Tonyo's story slowly unraveled, as did Jimmy's and Lorna's. He thought theirs were very interesting, even if Jimmy obviously didn't want to talk about his life before Hong Kong.

Ate Lorna was once a teacher at one of the private schools in Cagayan de Oro. Her pay was not enough to support her, her sickly mother and a young brother. Jimmy had been in Hong Kong the longest, over ten years. First as one of the contractual workers at the huge Hong Kong port and then as a regular worker at the warehouse where Tonyo had ended up. From a mere worker, Jimmy was now the supervisor of that particular

dock. Tonyo was lucky. Dinner ended with Jimmy offering to take Lorna home.

"Can I come?" Tonyo eagerly asked. "I'd like to see some more of the city."

"No, stay . . ." Jimmy started to say when Lorna interrupted.

"Let him come along, he's been cooped up in this small room all day." Jimmy gave Tonyo an irritated look.

"Ahh . . . mmm . . . maybe . . . I'll stay," Tonyo muttered.

"Jimmy *naman*, let him come with us," Lorna said in a very affectionate voice. "He needs to stretch his legs."

Jimmy could not say no, especially when it was asked in that manner. "C'mon then," he called to Tonyo, who was out the door first.

Kowloon by night was an absolutely fascinating sight for Tonyo. He felt as if he was in a carnival where all the rides had been dismantled and packed away while all the lights had been left on. The sights and sounds of the port city besieged Tonyo's senses as soon as they had turned the corner of the dimly lit apartment block. Shops, bars and restaurants on several streets were fully lighted with neon signs in both English and Chinese characters that hung over the narrow

streets like gaudy angels dressed in fuchsia, bright orange and lime green, calling hungry tourists and tired businessmen to sample their specialties. The smell of food frying, sautéing, broiling and grilling hung over the streets like an invisible canopy. Several windows hung with roast duck and goose, the oil still dripping from their headless bodies. Others held large aquariums filled with large lobster or fish waiting to be cooked. Tonyo felt hungry even if he had just eaten a very satisfying meal. He was totally mesmerized and followed Jimmy and Lorna blindly as they walked through streets and turned corners. He noticed they were leaving the busy section to turn into another set of apartment blocks.

These were obviously newer than those at Jimmy's neighborhood – Ate Lorna certainly deserved to live in a better place. The glass doors of Ate Lorna's building swung inside to reveal a small, well-lighted lobby. A woman stood behind the counter close to the wall. She greeted Lorna with a smile and a bow of her head. Lorna returned the politeness with the same gestures. An elevator took them up to Lorna's twenty-first floor apartment. The speed with which it went up the first twelve floors gave Tonyo a slight earache. It popped as soon as he gave out a loud, "Wow!" Jimmy and Lorna laughed at the young boy's

amazement. Did he remind them of themselves when they had first arrived in Hong Kong?

Jimmy and Tonyo left Lorna as soon as she entered her apartment. Jimmy tried to give her a good night peck on the cheek as she unlocked her door but she evaded it with a giggle and a push at her door. "Bye guys! See you on Sunday!" she said before she disappeared behind her door. Tonyo sensed Jimmy was in no mood to talk and was quiet the whole way down. He stared up at the floor numbers as they lighted up one by one. He also sensed that this was not the first time Lorna had avoided Jimmy's kisses. She seemed to like him. Jimmy was obviously crazy about her.

"Let's just take the bus home," muttered Jimmy under his breath as they walked to the bus stop.

Tonyo eagerly stepped into the yellow and red double-decker bus that stopped to pick them up. "Can we sit on top?" asked Tonyo. He had briefly seen a bus just like this in Manila, when Nanang Maria took him to the Luneta Park. He had wanted to ride it but the old lady would have had a difficult time climbing to the top deck. Now, he had his chance.

"Sure boy," was the somewhat surly reply.

The bus ride home was short but had given Tonyo a glimpse of the other island. Jimmy took time out from his blue mood to show Tony one other sight. "That, by the way," he indicated with his finger pointing to some faraway lights, "is the island of Hong Kong. That's where we're going on Sunday," he added.

"But aren't I already in Hong Kong?" asked Tonyo.

"Well, technically yes. See, boy, Hong Kong is made up of two parts. This part we're on is called Kowloon and is actually connected to China. Lorna works in a boutique on the part which is an island."

As Jimmy continued to sulk, Tonyo stared out at the far away lights. Was his mother here in Kowloon or in Hong Kong? Did she live in an apartment like Jimmy's, like Lorna's or a much nicer place? What were the people she worked for like? Did they have children? What were the children like? Would they make her forget her own?

"Hey boy, this is our stop," announced Jimmy as he nudged Tonyo who scampered after him, his reverie broken.

CHAPTER 14



THE SEARCH IS ON

The days till Sunday were a total blank for Tonyo. He remembered cleaning the apartment ("Nice job, boy."), venturing out into the area around Jimmy's apartment building and watching only one show on TV until Jimmy got back from work. ("All my hard-earned money is going to go to pay the electric bill at the rate you're watching TV, boy.") At long last, it was Sunday.

It was still dark outside and the streetlights were still on when Tonyo woke up. He could hear Jimmy snoring loudly in his room. He got up from his mattress and quietly opened the front door to go to the bathroom down the hall. Jimmy promised they would go out to look for his mother immediately after breakfast at Mac-Donald's. Tonyo was looking forward to that. He was getting tired of *congee*, noodles and leftovers for breakfast, lunch and dinner. In Manila, he had

THE SEARCH IS ON

treated himself to a Big Mac meal using his first salary. He had been happily burping hamburger and onions the rest of the day.

He moved around the apartment a little heavily so that Jimmy would wake up. He was eager to get started. But Jimmy had been out the night before with Gardo, Ramon, Joey, and Romy who also worked at the same warehouse and all of whom occupied the room nearest the bathroom. They were all Ilocanos from Vigan, Jimmy's hometown. He had met them soon after Jimmy had brought him home. He figured they owned all the stuff that hung in the bathroom. Jimmy had come in towards morning, smelling heavily of beer. Tonyo pretended to be asleep but that had been impossible as Jimmy was bumping into the furniture and cursing loudly. Tonyo finally got up and helped him into bed with all his clothes still on.

It was after ten before Jimmy got up and only because Tonyo reminded him they had to meet Ate Lorna at eleven by the Star Ferry Terminal. Tonyo had never seen anyone move so fast. In less than thirty minutes, they were at the ferry terminal. Jimmy had poured on a fragrance that could repel every fly, mosquito within two feet. If Tonyo got lost, he would only need to sniff for that scent.

Tonyo was pleasantly surprised to find out that he was riding on one of the boats that regularly

brought commuters from Kowloon to Hong Kong Island and vice versa. As soon as they had settled on the wooden benches on the top deck where they could feel the slight sea spray on their cheeks, Tonyo asked Jimmy. "Where can I change my money? I never got a chance to pay you back for the money you paid Wok and for all the food you've fed me."

"Don't forget the electricity you've used and the room space," added Jimmy.

"That too," said Tonyo a little too quietly.

"Don't worry about it, boy. We'll share the expenses as we go along," assured Jimmy as he gave Tonyo a hard pat on the back.

"We'll go to this *suki* of mine who gives a good rate, but only to certain people like me," boasted Jimmy with one eyebrow up. "How much do you want to change?"

"Will this be enough?" Tonyo asked as he pulled out ten blue one-thousand-peso bills. He couldn't have missed the surprise in Jimmy's face.

"Yah, yah, that should be enough to last you for a while."

Ate Lorna was already standing outside the ferry terminal when they arrived. "You couldn't

get up early, *no?*" she chided in jest as she noticed the deep dark circles under Jimmy's eyes.

"Yah, those guys kept me out longer than I wanted to," said Jimmy in an apologetic voice as he put on a pair of dark sunglasses.

While Jimmy and Lorna were exchanging jokes and flirting with each other, Tonyo looked at the crowd that was mostly Filipino. They occupied every available space, including the sidewalks and streets on which they had thrown woven mats and blankets, from the ferry landing to as far as the buildings across, forming a vast carpet of people. They were extremely noisy but a lot of laughter punctuated the constant chatter. Was his mother among them? Lorna noticed Tonyo's eagerness to start looking for his mother. But Jimmy said, "Let's go eat first. I haven't had breakfast." Tonyo turned to him and gave a slight frown. Jimmy knew how eager the boy was to find his mother. "At Jollibee," he added. That broke any resistance Tonyo had to the idea.

"It's a short walk from here and we can pass by my *suki* to have your money changed."

Tonyo tried to look at each and every face that passed him. Once, he thought he saw his mother and turned around to run after her. But it turned out to be someone else. Lorna saw the look of disappointment on his face and warned him, "Don't

be too disappointed if we can't find her today. Look how many Filipinos there are in Hong Kong." After changing money, ("How did you manage to earn so much?") and having lunch at Jollibee's ("They have a branch here!"), the trio set out for Statue Square. Right behind the Mandarin Hotel, Tonyo noticed a line of women seated on stools leaning against the wall, having pedicures and manicures in plain view of tourists and shoppers. Their bare feet rested on another's lap or fingers were fanned out to let the polish dry. The three friends asked all of them if they knew or had heard of Tonyo's mother. None had.

Tonyo was distracted from this second disappointment by a grass-colored tram that rolled by. It dangled from electric lines above and rolled on iron rails on the street. Compared to the brightly painted buses, it seemed like a relic from long ago but was apparently useful to many. He watched as it wobbled past, its bell ringing to warn pedestrians of its approach and passengers of an approaching stop. What else had Hong Kong to offer?

They stopped at the foot of the granite statue of Sir Thomas Jackson to discuss their strategy. "I think we have a better chance of finding your mother if we split up and meet here under 'the black man' in two hours," suggested Jimmy.

"What does your mother look like, Tonyo?" asked Lorna.

"She has short black hair up to her shoulders, black eyes, dark brown skin . . ."

"All the Filipinas in Hong Kong look like that!" interrupted Jimmy.

"Try to be more specific Tonyo," prodded Lorna.

Tonyo thought hard. He could see his mother's face in his mind but he couldn't find the words to really describe her.

"Never mind. We're wasting time. Let's all look together," ordered Jimmy.

"Tell us more about her, Tonyo," insisted Lorna. "Do you look like her?"

"Yes, yes," shouted Tonyo, "that's it. I look like her! Except, she's about a head taller than me and not as skinny."

"Including the dimple?"

"Yes, including the dimple."

"Now, at least, we have something more to work with," said Jimmy.

On the Statue Square bridge, many enterprising Filipino male photographers were taking pictures of the mostly female customers to send

their families back home. There were samples of their work taped to the side of the bridge. Smiling faces were imposed upon balloons, flowers and whatever else these only-on-Sunday photographers could think of. They seemed to be doing brisk business, as there was a long queue of preening and fussing women in their best clothes.

The trio moved among the many groups of Filipinos that crowded around Statue Square towards the building with a cavernous covered courtyard across the street. There were groups playing cards and gambling. They asked every possible person if they knew Lydia Peralta or someone who looked like Tonyo. It was like being back in Manila, in a huge, open air gathering, like a circus where there were many different side shows going on, except that these were not circus acts. "Maybe we should check-out the parlors," suggested Lorna, "your mother might be having her hair permed today."

"Good idea," seconded Jimmy.

They knew they were nearing their destination when the strong smell of ammonia assailed their noses. Across Queen's Road Central and up the steps towards St. Joseph's Cathedral, another row of women perched on stools were in different stages of hair dressing. While some were having their hair permed in the current style in Manila,

others were having a haircut or a blow-dry. None seemed to mind being gawked or laughed at by the many passersby. Again, the trio asked each and everyone if they knew Lydia Peralta.

"Where is she from?" asked one.

"From the south," answered Tonyo.

"Try Hong Kong Bank or City Hall," she offered. "They hang out there."

"The bank is just over there, so let's go there, but only after we've heard Mass," advised Lorna. "But if nothing comes up, then we might as well go back home. Everyone will be leaving to go back to their homes by sunset anyway."

"Good idea," seconded Jimmy. Tonyo only nodded his assent. He would have wanted to continue but Lorna was right. They had to hear Mass and what was the use if all the Filipinos would be gone anyway. He would have to wait until next Sunday to try and look for his mother again. "We'll all pray we find your mother," added Lorna.

The mass at St. Joseph's Cathedral was no different from that at home, except that the priest had a very crisp, clipped accent. There were very few Filipinos in the crowd and Tonyo wondered if they preferred to attend the religious rally in Statue Square instead. Tonyo prayed he would find his

mother. Maybe with Lorna and Jimmy praying for the same thing, they would find her today. After the mass, they walked back up in the direction of the Star Ferry, towards their last stop that was City Hall before heading back to Kowloon.

Tonyo couldn't help but gawk at the steel and glass mountain. He looked up through the glass and saw floors upon floors connected by several escalators running across each other. Massive steel pylons on each side, like those on a bridge, seemed to hold the building together. Suddenly, he heard very familiar words. They caressed his ear like the slight cool breeze that wafted in and out the large courtyard underneath the building guarded by two stone lions that seemed to be smiling.

People were speaking his dialect! He rushed towards the speakers. He looked at them eagerly, "Nay! Nay!" he eagerly called. "What's her name?" they asked simultaneously. "Lydia Lydia Peralta doyouknowher? Isshehere?" Tonyo asked without pause.

The women asked each other. Tonyo watched and listened as his mother's name floated among the women, his heart in his hand. Finally, the word came back. "Sorry 'tō, no one here knows her," a stout woman said.

"Come back again next Sunday, someone else might know her," a tall one said.

Lorna put her arm around Tonyo's shoulders and said kindly, "We'll come again next Sunday and the Sunday after that until we find her."

Jimmy put his arm around Lorna and Tonyo. "Don't worry, boy, we'll find her."

It was only as he sat wrapped in his thoughts on the ferry back to Kowloon that Tonyo began to feel tired, not the bone-shaking kind of tired, but enough to make him not want to move, even if it meant staying on the boat the whole night. He had wanted to sit alone and deliberately chose a bench far from Jimmy and Lorna. He looked towards the pair. They were both slouched low on the bench and she had her head on his shoulder. They looked like two wilted roses left in a vase. They were as tired as he was. He decided it was his turn to treat them to a nice Chinese dinner.

Instead, Lorna invited them to her apartment for dinner. She said she had prepared something and only needed to heat it up in the microwave oven. Jimmy and Tonyo set the table while Lorna prepared the food. This time, they had corn soup with egg and crab, fried rice with salted fish and beef cooked in a spicy sauce. Jimmy and Tonyo heaped praises on the food. Lorna said she picked up the recipes from a Chinese cookbook. The

dinner seemed to perk the trio up. Jimmy was his brash self again, Lorna giggled at all his jokes, even those that didn't make sense, and Tonyo volunteered more jokes. It wasn't even ten when Lorna called it a night. She said she had to be at the store earlier than usual. She reminded Jimmy that he too had to be up early. Besides, and she looked at Tonyo, they had done so much walking today that they all could use the rest. Both Tonyo and Jimmy left Lorna's tiny, cozy apartment reluctantly. It reminded both of them so much of home. She had all sorts of little things here and there, like the *capiz*-shell lamp, that was obviously from home.

For the rest of the week, Tonyo would have to try to keep away from Mr. Cho's eagle eyes. But he also knew he couldn't spend the day just watching TV. He would have to plan his life. To start, he would finally write his postcards home. At the bookshop where he had bought them including the stamps, he had spent more time than he had wanted to choosing the many sights of Hong Kong he wanted to share with Lolo Carding and the kids, Father Randy and Mang Mario, even Tatay. Did his father know where he had gone? Did he care? A tear splashed on the card. Tonyo began to write furiously.

THE SEARCH IS ON

Dear Lolo Carding,

I am writing you from Hong Kong. I finally made it all the way here. I am living with a friend who is helping me find Nanny. His friend is also helping us. She is a nice lady who works in one of the fancy stores here. She was also a teacher like Nanny. My friend Jimmy works as a supervisor at one of the big warehouses here. How are Melody, Ryan and Neneng?

I like Hong Kong. Manila is bigger but Hong Kong is busier. There are a lot of Filipinos here. And other foreigners. There are so many stores and restaurants here. Maybe one day when I have a lot of money, I can take you all here.

Love,

Tonyo

P.S. Please send me Nanny's address to this address.

I lost the one she gave me.



Dear Mang Mario,

I am finally here in Hong Kong. I haven't found my mother yet but I have found some nice friends. Jimmy works at a big warehouse here while Lorna works at a fancy store. They are helping me find my mother. I like Hong Kong very much.

Love,

Tonyo





Tonyo stood up from the plastic dining table and walked to the door. He needed to stretch and go to the bathroom. The whole building reverberated with the silence that was usual at this hour before lunch on to the early afternoon. Early mornings were frantic with everyone rushing to go to school or work. Lines at the bathroom were horrible. Each tenant had his schedule but it was never followed. Late afternoon on to evening was chaos. Kids were coming home from school and

releasing all their pent-up energies and parents from work released their own pent-up frustrations on their kids.

The days until the next Sunday passed at a snail-like pace. Try as he could to keep busy, he was often bored. The shows on TV were mostly in Chinese, a language he found rough and shrill. Sometimes, he would venture out to explore the neighborhood. It was similar to Dolfo's in Manila including the pervading stink from the sewers mixed with the smell of seawater. Except that here in Kowloon and Hong Kong, there was an overwhelming sense of prosperity. It seemed that everyone could get rich on this island.

Sunday finally arrived. Tonyo was, as usual, up before anybody else. The Ilocanos next door had just staggered in from another rousing night. Thank goodness Jimmy had declined their invitation. As he walked down the corridor towards the bathroom, he heard loud coughing followed by a series of hawks. Must be the pale, yellow Mr. Tang. In front of the Loks, he heard Mrs. Lok shuffling around in the furry, dirty-pink slippers she wore all day — probably preparing Mr. Lok's breakfast. He took over from the night guard at the warehouse where Jimmy worked. The

Mas' apartment was unusually still. Two parents and seven children would certainly make a racket. Grumpy Mr. Cho was always shouting at Mrs. Ma to keep the kids quiet. He babysat the kids once in while and earned a few dollars for his time. Although they didn't speak the same language, he somehow got himself understood. The youngest was Neneng's age, the oldest, a little younger than Tonyo. Both were boys and spoiled by their parents. In between were five girls, two of whom were twins. Jimmy had asked Tonyo one morning, before leaving for work, if he wanted to watch the Ma kids while their parents attended a relative's wake. Apparently, deaths were a big thing with the Chinese. Mr. Ma, who worked as an accountant at the warehouse, had asked Jimmy at work that day. Tonyo said he didn't have a problem but would he be paid? "Only money makes sense in this country," was Jimmy's answer. After that, it seemed Mr. and Mrs. Ma always had a funeral to attend.

The first time was the most difficult as only the oldest son could speak good English. But he was constantly on his cellphone so that it began to seem like an extra appendage. The twin sisters that came after him teased him endlessly so Tonyo figured it was girls he spoke too. "Do you have girlfriend?" the twin with freckles asked Tonyo.

"No," he answered, shaking his head. He had a crush on Fredo's sister, Veronica, but she was older and thought Tonyo and Fredo were just kids. "Wait till I get home," thought Tonyo, she won't think I'm a kid anymore." In fact, the hair above his upper lip had grown thicker and he could feel his voice beginning to crack. His throat felt rough and itchy all the time. He wanted to have a voice like Jimmy's – low and dark.

He wished he had received Nanay's address from Lolo Carding but no letter from home had arrived yet. Jimmy had assured him he had mailed the postcards.

This time, they met where they had left off their search – at the Hong Kong Bank. Lorna had called to remind them of the time and place. Tonyo didn't think she would come again. "We'll be there," Jimmy happily assured her. As long as Ate Lorna was interested in Tonyo's case, Jimmy would continue to allow him to stay at his apartment and help him look for his mother.

Today, the women were celebrating a birthday. They had laid out a blanket and every inch was covered with containers and plates of homemade Filipino food. This time, they had better luck. Someone immediately said she knew Lydia but that she didn't usually hang

around with them. She took out a small, red address book and thumbed for her address. Tonyo was so excited he couldn't keep still. Inside his sneakers, his toes were twitching like worms stranded on a pavement.

Finally, the woman looked up and said, "Here it is," and proceeded to write Nanay's address and telephone number on a paper napkin — "6B, Belleview Terraces, 75 Belleview Road, Repulse Bay."

"Thank you Ma'am," he gushed as he took the slightly greasy napkin from her. Tonyo held it tightly, as if it were treasure. Jimmy and Lorna crowded around him and peered at the words written in a scraggly script on the napkin.

"She lives all the way by the bay!" protested Jimmy. Tonyo's heart dipped. Did that mean he wouldn't take him there?

Lorna immediately noticed Tonyo's expression and said, "Don't worry, we'll take you there. It's a nice, long ride you'll enjoy."

"Arewegoingtherenow?" Tonyo asked without stopping to breathe.

"Yes, yes," laughed Lorna. "As a matter of fact, I've decided we should take a cab there."

"What!" protested Jimmy. "That's going to cost us a lot of hard-earned money!"

"Jimmy *naman*, the bay is quite far and Tonyo would like to see his mother right away. Look at him, he's ready to bolt."

Jimmy looked at the boy pacing up and down the covered court in long strides. "Let's call first just to make sure she's home," muttered Jimmy realizing he really had no choice.

Lorna took the napkin from Tonyo and headed for the phone. How would his mother react to his being in Hong Kong? Would she scold him? Or would she give him a big hug? He sure needed one. Lorna dialed the number. What if she had moved out? She tried to signal Tonyo to relax.

"Wey?" he heard her say. Tonyo had been in Hong Kong long enough to know that that meant "hello" in Cantonese.

Lorna asked if she could speak to Lydia Peralta. There was a short pause as Lorna listened to the answer. She nodded her head a lot and her eyes began to smile. Her growing excitement became quite evident. Then she spoke into the phone again. All this time, Tonyo didn't take his eyes off her. Even Jimmy got caught in the excitement and suspense as he leaned towards Lorna.

Then finally, Lorna said in English, "Thank you very much. We'll be going there right now and will wait for her in the lobby."

As soon as she put down the phone, Tonyo and Jimmy pounced on her, both wanting to know what had transpired. She looked at Tonyo and excitedly said, "Your mother lives in that address but she isn't home just now. Her employer says she just went out for a while to run an errand. She should be back soon. We can wait for her in the lobby."

CHAPTER 15



FOUND

The drive towards the bay area was one of the small island's scenic routes with a view of the sea most of the way, but Tonyo hardly noticed even as he looked out the window. He had too many thoughts running through his mind. What would his mother say when she knew the reason for his running away and coming all the way here? Would she send him back home alone? Or would she go back with him? What would she do when she got home? Would she leave his father? What about her job? Would he tell her about everything that had happened to him since he left, including those months with Benny and the gang? Lorna tried to distract him from his thoughts by pointing to things she thought would interest him. "Look at that beach! If you like, we can go there one day."

The trio finally arrived at the posh apartment building. "Pheeew!" whistled Jimmy. It was one

of those modern buildings built by one of Hong Kong's famous architects.

Jimmy was still paying the driver when a woman rushed out from the revolving door with such force that they continued to turn long after. She went straight to Tonyo and enveloped him in her arms. Tonyo wrapped his long arms around her. "*Anak!* Tonyo!" she repeated in between sobs. Finally, she let go to look at her son. The look of surprise that passed her face escaped no one, including Tonyo. "*Anak*, what are you doing here?" she asked as she wiped the tears from her eyes. "And how you've grown! When I last hugged you, you were a head shorter than I. Now, you are a head taller! And you have a slight moustache on top of your lip!"

Tonyo blushed at this observation but allowed her to hug him again. When she let go, she said, "I couldn't believe what I had just heard when Mrs. Tang told me my son was coming over to see me. My son, I told her, is in the Philippines. Well, she said, a lady called and said she and your son and another friend would come and wait for you in the lobby. This must be the lady and the friend," she said as she turned towards Lorna and Jimmy. Jimmy had his arm around Lorna's shoulder and she held a handkerchief to teary eyes. Mrs. Peralta hugged Lorna first and then Jimmy.

"*Salamat*. Thank you for taking care of my child." "It was no problem," Jimmy answered. Lorna nodded in agreement.

"Nanay, this is Jimmy and this is Lorna," indicated Tonyo with this hand as he introduced his two friends.

"Come, come upstairs. I didn't have time to prepare anything as I rushed down as soon as I got the news. But, it shouldn't take me very long. Mrs. Tang is a wonderful employer. I have so many questions to ask Tonyo," she said as she took Tonyo's hand.

Not once did Mrs. Peralta let go of Tonyo's hand. Not in the elevator. Not even when she introduced him, Jimmy and Lorna to Mrs. Tang, who was waiting by the door, a cigarette in her hand. Tonyo immediately noticed how thin and pale she was, her long, crinkled neck sticking out of a Chinese collar. "Your son looks exactly like you," she commented in a low hoarse voice. "Is this the one you always say will go to college and be a doctor someday?"

"Yes, Ma'am, this is the one," answered Tonyo's mother as she beamed.

"Go then to the kitchen and don't worry about dinner. Mr. Tang and I have a dinner to attend. Besides, today is supposed to be your day off.

Have your son and his guests for lunch," she ordered. As she shuffled off, she stopped and said, "Your son can stay the night. I'm sure you both have a lot to talk about."

"Thank you Ma'am," answered Tonyo's mother, who finally let go of her son's hand when he sat down in one of the chairs around the large kitchen table.

"Are you the only one in this huge apartment?" asked Tonyo judging the size of the place from the size of the kitchen.

"No," answered his mother. "There's one other maid but she's on her day off. I cook and take care of Mrs. Tang. She's not well. We'll talk about other things later. First you have to tell me why you're here! I just received a letter from you a few days ago. When did you leave Lauan?" Tonyo's mother rattled off the questions, as Tonyo squirmed in his chair.

Lorna noticed. "Mrs. Peralta, can we help you with anything?" she offered.

"*Susmaryosep*, I forgot to set out some food! Well, the plates are in that drawer, the spoons and forks in that other one, and the glasses up there," she indicated with a pointed finger at several drawers while her head and half her body leaned into an open refrigerator. Tonyo looked at Ate

Lorna with near reverence. Once again, she had done him another favor. He owed this woman half his life already. He knew he would have to tell his mother everything – down to the smallest detail such as robbing the church basket of one hundred pesos. His mother had a way of digging into his soul and scooping out his buried secrets. But he wasn't ready to tell her anything yet and certainly not in the presence of Jimmy and Lorna. He prayed his mother could wait until they were alone together.

Lunch was filled with stories of Hong Kong from Jimmy and Lorna as they recounted how it was they came to be there. Tonyo learned more about them over a sumptuous meal of rice and a meat stew with large pieces of potatoes, carrots and string beans. There was also a fairly large fried fish. "This is specially for Tonyo," his mother said. "I know how much he likes fried fish."

Jimmy, it turned out, had illegally entered the island on a commercial fishing boat. A distant relative was captain of the crew and he hired Jimmy to be part of the crew doing odd jobs here and there. It was a terrible life, Jimmy said. So, when he got the chance, he jumped ship in Hong Kong. He was lucky he chanced upon a retired Filipino sailor who not only took him in but managed to get him false papers and a job. He eventually managed to have legal papers. "So

that's the debt he's paying," thought Tonyo. Lorna, on the other hand, had a story similar to Mrs. Peralta's. She too had come to Hong Kong to work as a maid but instead, she had been hired as a salesgirl in one of the large Japanese department stores in Hong Kong. As she spoke excellent English and was extremely charming, she quickly moved up. Eventually, she moved out and found the job at the boutique where she worked now. Lucky, whenever Mrs. Peralta was about to ask how it was they knew Tonyo, either one of the two would deflect the question like shields. Somehow, they realized Tonyo would have to answer that on his own. Immediately after the meal, Lorna asked permission to leave. She said she still had another appointment and mass to hear. Jimmy, of course, said he needed to go with Lorna. "Meet me at the apartment tomorrow after work," Jimmy said as he gave Tonyo a friendly pat on the back. Lorna gave him a friendly kiss on the cheek and whispered "Good luck."

As soon as the pair left, Mrs. Peralta hugged Tonyo again. Then, without bothering to clear the table of the dishes, she sat on the other side of Tonyo, and in a somewhat stern voice said, "Now, tell me why you are here and how you got here."

Tonyo looked down on the tiled floor and muttered, "Shouldn't we clean the table first?"

"That can wait."

Tonyo kept his head down and continued to stare at the black and pink spatter on the tiles. Where would he start? There was a long silence. Eventually, it was his mother that made the decision for him.

"Is it your father?" she asked in a voice that had lost its previous sternness and now quivered slightly. Tonyo looked up at her and nodded, the weight of the world lifted from his shoulders.

"I heard rumors from Lani and others, but didn't believe them as I thought you or Lolo Carding would write me about it. I also thought it was your temper getting the best of you. "Why didn't you tell me?" she asked as tears began to stream down her face.

"What could you have done?" asked Tonyo, anguish written all over his face upon seeing his mother's tears. "You would have come home and not solved anything. The money you sent paid for food and tuition and . . ." Tonyo paused to swallow, ". . . Tatay's gambling debts. Is that why you left, *Nay*? You knew that if you didn't do something soon, we would have nothing to eat. Lolo Carding knew that too. That's why he helped me leave." Tonyo couldn't stop the wave of words as the many realizations crashed over him. They surged and foamed over his mother's ears as she

listened to his story. She interrupted him only to ask questions or to clarify some things and to switch the kitchen lights on. He had gotten to the part about Mang Mario when Mrs. Tang's voice broke through his story.

"Mr. Tang and I will be leaving now, Lydia," she announced from behind the kitchen door. His mother stood up immediately and followed Mrs. Tang to the front door. "Introduce your son to Mr. Tang," she ordered. She turned towards the kitchen and signaled for Tonyo to come out and meet the master of the house.

"This is Tonyo, Mr. Tang," his mother said as Tonyo extended his hand towards a man who was not much taller than Mrs. Tang and was just as slim. He had thick white hair and large ears. His thin lips covered large teeth, two of which were covered in gold that glittered when he smiled. If Mrs. Tang appeared to be somewhat made of ice, Mr. Tang was all warmth. He took Tonyo's hands firmly in his own and gave them a vigorous shake.

"I hope you enjoy your stay in Hong Kong. Stay as long as you like but I do hope you are not taking our Lydia home," he said in an impeccable English accent. Then he turned to Tonyo's mother and said, "Do not bother to wait up for us. I have the keys. Good night and see you tomorrow. Breakfast is at the usual time."

"Good night Lydia. Please don't forget to bring me a fresh thermos of water," reminded Mrs. Tang.

"Good night Mr. Tang, Mrs. Tang. I hope you have a nice time," said Tonyo's mother as she closed the door after them. Then to Tonyo she turned and said, "Follow me as I close up and tidy up their room. You were saying you were introduced to Mang Mar?"

"Mario, Nanay," Tonyo corrected.

"Yes, Mario," his mother answered. Tonyo continued where he left off as he helped his mother turn the bed and close the windows. He couldn't help thinking how great it would be to jump into this large bed and slowly sink into the soft mattress among the sweet smelling sheets. He stopped only to carry Mrs. Tang's thermos to the kitchen while his mother turned off all the lights in the living room except the one by the hallway. While he waited for her to come into the kitchen, he gathered the soiled plates into a pile and put them in the sink. Tonight was going to be a long one.

CHAPTER 16



DILEMMA

Tonyo heard the Tangs come in from their dinner party. He looked up at the clock in the kitchen and noticed that it was a little past midnight. It seemed he and his mother had been sitting and talking around the kitchen table since forever. He suddenly felt sharp painful twitches run up and down his shoulders. His buttocks felt like stone. They had been trying to figure out what to do. Would Nanay have to go back to Lauan? If she didn't, would Tonyo have to go back? What would happen if he did? What if he stayed in Hong Kong and found a job? Nanay would not hear of it. He was too young to be working, besides he had to finish high school and go on to college.

The slight distraction seemed to have the same effect on Nanay. She stood up from her chair and rubbed the small of her back as she stretched it. "We won't solve anything tonight. Let's go to

DILEMMA

sleep," she said as she walked towards her room. Tonyo couldn't have agreed more. "Pull out the extra mattress under my bed while I go get another pillow."

Tonyo woke up to the sound of Mrs. Tang's low, hoarse voice giving Nanay some instructions. "Fetch Mimo at the vet's. Pass by the deli for some fish, then the florist's for the flowers I ordered." Tonyo heard the kitchen door swing close. "Lydia, I forgot to mention my silk dress and Mr. Tang's suit at the cleaners."

"Yes, Ma'am. I'll do that as soon as I'm done here," he heard his mother answer.

"Take your son with you. He could help."

"I was planning to Ma'am. But first, I'll have to get him out bed."

"That poor child. What trouble he must have taken to find you."

If only she knew, thought Tonyo.

"Yes," answered his mother in a strange tone, "he did go through a lot to find me."

"What will you do now Lydia?" Mrs. Tang asked.

"I don't know yet."

"You will tell us of your plans, won't you?"

"Don't worry Ma'am, I will."

Nanay's English is so good, thought Tonyo.

"I'll be gone for most of the day so don't worry about lunch for me. But make sure everything is set for tonight's dinner. You are making that fish Mr. Neeson likes so much and the pudding Mrs. Neeson loves aren't you? The one you call *lechye flun*?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"If you need me, I'll be at the Club for lunch. Before that, I'll be at the salon," said Mrs. Tang as her voice trailed off.

"Yes, Ma'am. Have a good day! Bye!"

Then he heard another voice he had not heard before, but sounded familiar.

"So when do I meet your son?"

"I'm on my way to wake him up right now. Could you bring out the bacon and eggs in the warmer for him?"

The mention of food brought Tonyo to his feet. He rushed out to the bathroom and bumped into Rose who held a plate of bacon. The smell of crisp, newly fried bacon made Tonyo's stomach growl. It brought a slight blush to his face.

"Why Ate Lydia! He's not a boy, he's almost a man!"

"He's too young for you," his mother snapped.

"Hi, I'm Rose," she said as she introduced herself. "Your mother talks of you all the time. But from the way she spoke, I thought you were not even a teenager." At this she giggled.

"Go and do your cleaning, Rose," his mother ordered gruffly.

"Is she always like that?" asked Tonyo in between mouthfuls of bacon, eggs and rice.

"Who, Rose?" asked Nanay.

"No, Mrs. Tang. She's in or out the door."

Nanay laughed. "That's how most rich women live. Their husbands leave for work shortly after sunrise, come home late at night while their wives shop, go the hairdresser or to the *sah-lon*," and at this word, Nanay made a gesture with her hand over her hair, "or have lunch with other rich wives. But," continued Nanay almost in one breath, "don't let Mrs. Tang fool you. She heads many charitable institutions, one of which helps us overseas workers. You saw all those Filipinos hanging around the parks and shopping areas, if not for her, the police would have gone on harassing them. And she is also a very generous employer. She gave me money to go home this year, as a bonus. It turns out, I might have to go home earlier than I planned."

"So, is that what you have decided?" Tonyo asked.

"Let's talk about it while shopping. I need to do a few errands and prepare for tonight's dinner. The Tangs are having someone really important for dinner tonight. Finish everything on your plate. You won't get this kind of food back home."

"I know," he mumbled, his mouth full of bacon.

On the bus down to the Central district, Tonyo's mother bared her plans for Tonyo and herself. As his mother spoke, Tonyo noticed how different the scenery had become from the one he had gotten used to. Cemented mountainsides and heavily wooded areas on one side and a continuous view of the sea on the other, replaced buildings. They passed a golf club and some beaches. He spotted a hawk circling the bay.

As soon as she could leave, she said, she would bring Tonyo home and settle things with Tatay. Then, she would come back to Hong Kong.

"How will you 'settle things' with Tatay," Tonyo asked.

"I don't know yet. I guess it all depends on what happens when we get home."

There was a long pause as each one mulled over the last statement.

"Can't I stay here in Hong Kong for at least one year? I know I can earn enough money to finish school later. I promise to go to college. Maybe I can study here. I love Hong Kong. I can stay with Jimmy. I'm sure he won't mind having me, especially if I can pay. I've already earned a little money baby-sitting for a neighbor," Tonyo rambled on, not allowing his mother to interrupt.

His mother looked at him with an amused look on her face that surprised Tonyo. He thought she would give him that "teacher-look" she had when she was displeased with him or his siblings. "Do you realize that you are in Hong Kong illegally and that at anytime the Hong Kong police can sweep down on us and take you away?" she asked.

Tonyo gasped. He hunched his shoulders and hunkered down as if willing the bus seat to swallow and hide him from the police. For now, any plans of staying in Hong Kong had disintegrated. His mother laughed. She knew her pronouncement had the effect she wanted. "Don't worry. First thing tomorrow morning, we will go to the Philippine Consulate and get you the proper papers, like a passport. I just hope they won't make it hard for you."

Throughout the rest of the morning, Tonyo obediently followed his Mother around like the Tang's dog, Mimo, that they had picked up first at the vet. It was so happy to see Tonyo's mother that it kept jumping at her long after they had left the vet's office. It had given her about a dozen licks on the face when she received it in her arms. She cooed and crooned to it like it was her baby. She asked it, in English, if they treated him well and that she was sorry but he had to stay at the vet's for a few days. Then, she introduced it to Tonyo. "This is my son Tonyo. He'll be staying with us for a few days. Don't worry he'll be nice to you." As if it understood perfectly well what had just been said, the pure white bundle of fluff jumped into Tonyo's ready arms and gave him a few licks. Their friendship was sealed.

Tonyo knew that his mother had made up her mind. He really had no choice but to go home to Lauan. Manila was not even an option. His only consolation was that he would get to stay in Hong Kong a few more days.

While the Tangs and their guests were enjoying the exquisite dinner Lydia had prepared for them, Jimmy arrived at the apartment with Tonyo's things, a couple of letters, and a couple of packages for his family and Lorna's. One letter

was from Lolo Carding that included Nanay's address and the other from Mang Mario. As Tonyo explained his and Lydia's plans to Jimmy while they sat around the kitchen table, Rose hovered over them trying to catch Jimmy's attention. She kept asking Jimmy in a voice coated with honey and a wide smile if he wanted a drink or something to eat. Jimmy smiled at her politely but continued to listen intently to Tonyo. Thankfully, Nanay called her to take care of the Tangs and their guests' needs while she joined Jimmy and Tonyo in their conversation. Tonyo was hoping Jimmy could convince Nanay he could stay in Hong Kong but to his disappointment, Jimmy agreed to all of Nanay's plans.

Early the next day, Tonyo and Nanay left to go to the Philippine Consulate. The Consul General was an amiable man who had eyes just like the Chinese but was brown-skinned, had a full beard and looked every bit like a Pinoy Santa. None of the Chinese Tonyo met had facial hair. He seemed to know Nanay as they spoke to each other in a very familiar way. He even asked about the Tangs. Nanay tried to relate Tonyo's situation as best she could. When Tonyo tried to give his own version, she shushed him. The Consul General looked at Tonyo several times, his expression reflecting a growing amazement at the boy's adventures. At

one point he even said, "The newspapers here would love to get hold of this story."

To which Nanay immediately answered, "Not my son!" And to which the Consul General responded with a shrug and an expression of resignation. Tonyo felt a little sorry for the Consul. He could only imagine the number of women that came to see him everyday, each with a different problem. While they were waiting to see him, a long line was forming outside his office.

The Consul General assured Nanay that something could be done, only that it would take some time. "You know how things move in Manila," he said. Tonyo was still hoping something would happen that would prevent him from going back home.

"You might have to ask Jimmy if you can stay with him until your papers are fixed. I'm not sure the Tangs will let you stay with me," Nanay said worriedly. "But while we have this chance, let's do some shopping for those back home." The thought of buying things for those left at home seemed to lift Nanay's mood.

"Nay, are we taking the plane home?" asked Tonyo excitedly. "It's the only thing I haven't ridden yet, I think."

"Maybe if I had gone to work in Saudi you would have," answered Nanay in a stern voice that was laced with laughter. She still could not believe what her son had done. Every time she thought about what he had gone through, and that was often, her insides began to churn and mix themselves up. She often tried to tell herself he might have been exaggerating. But she knew her son and knew that his story was true down to the last details. Over the three days they were together, even after he had spilled his story, little bits and pieces still tumbled out.

Mrs. Tang said it would not be a problem for Tonyo to stay in the apartment until they had to leave. Nanay had asked permission only after she promised Mrs. Tang she would come back after her two-week vacation.

Over the next week, Tonyo had dinner with Jimmy and Lorna one more time in Jimmy's apartment. It seemed things had really been developing between the pair. Tonyo noticed how often they glanced at each other and how she sometimes touched his face and how he tried to hold her hand. No wonder he was totally immune to Rose's attempts to attract him. Tonyo congratulated himself for having had a hand in that story. He also took that opportunity to say

goodbye to the Mas. He noticed how Mr. and Mrs. Ma's face seemed to sag at the prospect of not being able to attend their many relatives' funerals. He waved good-bye to grumpy Mr. Cho, who stood behind his desk giving everybody the evil eye. Even him, Tonyo would miss.

As the Consul General had promised, he called Mrs. Peralta first thing in the morning to say Tonyo's passport had arrived from Manila and they could leave any day they wished. That same day, she asked Mrs. Tang if she and Tonyo could go to the airline office to buy their plane ticket. They were leaving on the earliest flight to Manila.

At the airline office, Tonyo waited impatiently with his mother in line. Were all these Pinoys going home? Would they be able to get seats? Finally, hours past noon, it was their turn. Tonyo knew Hong Kong well enough to go out and buy lunch so that they could eat in line. Nanay didn't dare leave her spot. The plane leaving day after tomorrow was almost full but yes, there were two available seats, one of which was by the window. Nanay immediately gave the ticket agent their names, took out the money and paid. Where her money had been, she put the two tickets, refusing the pretty cardboard wallet the ticket agent gave her.

Around the corner, on the way to the bus stop, Nanay turned into an alley that was lined with booths selling all sorts of things from bags to bottles.

On the bus back to the apartment, Tonyo asked to see his passport. As soon as she gave it to him, he passed his hand over the smooth green cover with gold letters. He opened it and read every word written on the flap. Then, he asked for his ticket. Again, he read every word. He wanted to be sure he knew all the rules. Then he got to the most important part. He read his name — *Peralta, Antonio C.* — typewritten where it said Passenger's Name very slowly. Then he stopped. "Nanay, what time are we leaving? It says here 1645. What kind of time is that?" Mrs. Peralta smiled and explained it as she would have to her sixth grade class. "Airlines and ships tell time in terms of hours, just like in the army. Seven-o'clock in the morning is, for example, seven hundred hours, but one-o'clock is thirteen hundred hours; two-o'clock is fourteen hundred all the way to midnight which is . . . ?"

"Zero hundred hour."

"Very good."

"So what would you do if you were a little confused and wanted to know the time in ordinary terms?"

Tonyo thought for a while and then tentatively said, "I would subtract twelve from the number of hours given, but only for those after twelve noon."

"Excellent," said his mother proudly, "my son will make it to college."

Only when they were close to their stop did Tonyo give his passport and plane ticket back to his mother for safekeeping. Tonight and all of tomorrow would be spent packing all the things they were bringing home. A pile of *balikbayan* boxes was just waiting to be unfolded and filled. Tonyo was astonished at the amount of things they were taking home. It would be like celebrating Christmas ten times over. They even had gifts for Mang Mario and Father Randy. Nanay had promised they could stay in Manila for one day to visit with them.

The whole household was awake early, Mr. and Mrs. Tang included. They both wanted to say good-bye to Nanay and Tonyo before going off to work or socials. Nanay served them breakfast and as she was taking the plates away, Mr. Tang stood up and gave Nanay a firm handshake and said, "See you in two weeks Lydia. Enjoy your visit

home." Then he called for Tonyo to come out from the kitchen. He took Tonyo's hand in his and gave him a tight handshake. "Your mother need not worry about you anymore. You'll grow up okay," he told a much-surprised boy.

Mrs. Tang gave Nanay a quick hug and said, "Yes, enjoy your visit home." She turned to Tonyo only to ruffle his hair. Even Mimo would miss Lydia and Tonyo too. From the day they met, it followed Tonyo everywhere, and now it licked his face endlessly as he cuddled it.

Back in the kitchen, while Tonyo was helping Rose clean up, Nanay was giving her last minute instructions. "And don't forget Ma'am's thermos filled with cold water every night."

"Ay, Ate Lydia, stop worrying. You've written everything down already. Go finish your packing and don't forget to bring home the package for my family in Mindoro."

"Don't worry, Rose, it's all packed," Nanay said kindly, "I'll send it by courier as soon as I get to Manila."

The taxi to take them to the airport arrived right on time. Rose and even the Chinese doorman helped load the bags and bundles into the car. "Eya, Pilipino going home!" exclaimed the driver.

Tonyo plastered his face to the taxi window all the way to the airport. He tried to store in his memory as many images as he could of the month he spent in Hong Kong. He had a few pictures that his mother thought to take of many important occasions and sights, including one at Statue Square which they sent home to announce their homecoming. He tried not to think of what could happen when they finally reached Luaun.

At the immense glass and steel airport, Nanay had to call Tonyo's attention many times as he distractedly followed her around. He found the hustle and bustle of the airport totally fascinating. Everything was so advanced. At the check-in counter she said, "Count the number of bags, Tonyo, and remember the ones with the bright orange ribbons are ours." Standing in line at immigration, she reminded him to "Fill up that paper right away!" Walking on the moving sidewalks that Tonyo called flat escalators, she said, "Don't wander into any of the stores, we have enough *pasalubong*." He had no interest in the stores; he wanted to see the colossal aircraft up close, but from behind the safety of the glass windows. When would they finally get to their gate?

When they finally did, Tonyo couldn't sit still. Eventually, Nanay allowed him to roam

around, as there was enough time, although Tonyo himself came back to her several times like lead to a magnet.

Tonyo stared at the large craft looming in front of him. How was it possible that such a massive thing could fly so high and so fast? He took note of the make of the different craft including their names and logos. He recognized Philippine Air Lines immediately as he did Cathay Pacific, the latter having the most planes.

When their flight number was finally called, Tonyo jumped from his seat and rushed to the already long line. It seemed there were other people as eager to go home. Only then did Tonyo realize that he really wanted to go home. Homesickness, it seemed, was contagious.

Their seats were at the back of the plane, on the last row, right in front of those the stewardesses occupied, one of who had to help Nanay and him put on their seat belts. "She's so pretty and smells good," noticed Tonyo. As the plane taxied to its designated runway, Nanay began to pray. She nudged Tonyo to do the same and held his hand. He mumbled a quick prayer, his eyes fixed on the movie screen where emergency procedures were being demonstrated. When she finished, he intently studied the emergency instructions card tucked in the pocket of the seat in front of him.

From his window seat he watched excitedly as the plane took off. He didn't have to look out the window to know. His stomach gave all the signals. It felt the plane's wheels leave the runway. As the plane climbed higher, it could feel every foot it climbed. And when the wheels tucked into the plane's belly, it gave a little lurch. It settled as soon as the plane took an even course. Only then did he notice how tightly Nanay had been holding his hand. He turned to look at her. Her eyes were tightly closed, her lips pale, and sweat was starting to appear on her forehead and upper lip and she held a rosary in the other hand. "Nothing to be scared about 'Nay," he assured her gently, keeping his already numb hand in his mother's.

Just then the pretty and perfumed stewardess approached them, leaned over to Tonyo and asked, "I know you might be a little too old, but would you like to see the cockpit?"

"Wow! Yes!" answered Tonyo.

"Just follow me," she said. "Is this your first ride in a plane?"

Tonyo nodded.

"Enjoy!" she said as she opened the cockpit door.

"Welcome to the cockpit of an Airbus, son," greeted one of the pilots of the plane without

looking back at Tonyo. "I'm Captain Cunanan," and with his right hand as guide he introduced the others. "This is my co-pilot, Captain Ramos and the woman over there is Flight Engineer Reynoso. Captain Ramos here will show you how we fly this thing."

As the co-pilot showed Tonyo some of the plane's instruments and explained their use, he thought "Wow! When I'm done with high school, I'm going to flying school."

Tonyo had lots of questions that even the captain and flight engineer tried to answer. They were so amused and impressed by the boy's intelligent curiosity that they let him stay longer than he should have. "You need to go back to your seat now, son. We'll be landing in Manila soon," commanded the Captain.

Tonyo thanked everyone for their generosity and walked back to his seat. Many of the passengers smiled at him, especially those that sat by the aisle. His mother had visibly calmed down. She was no longer so pale and she was smiling up at Tonyo.

"You have enough time to gobble down that snack before we land," she said.

Tonyo regretted having taken Nanay's advice. As soon as the plane began its descent, so

did Tonyo's stomach. It took a superhuman effort on his part to keep the food inside. Until he felt the wheels hit the runway, it threatened to rush up his throat. It was his turn to sweat and turn grey. But he was prepared. His mother, having noted his pasty complexion, immediately handed him the bag for just that sort of thing. Maybe he wasn't going to be a pilot after all.

CHAPTER 17



HOME

Tonyo knew he was in Manila. The chaos of the airport reminded him of that in the seaport. He couldn't wait to get out. It took them quite a while to collect all their bags. Nanay constantly counted them as each came up the luggage conveyor. Tonyo was in charge of hauling them off the conveyor and on to the cart. Finally, all eight bundles were accounted for and they were out of the airport and in a taxi that would take them to a small pension near the port area. As soon as they had settled into their small but clean room, Tonyo called Mang Mario.

"Tonyo? Is that you? Your voice has changed! Where are you calling from? Did you find your mother? I thought I would never hear from you again!" rattled off Mang Mario. Tonyo chuckled, thrilled to hear Mang Mario's voice.

"I'm in Manila and staying at the Marigold Pension with my mother."

"You found her!" exclaimed Mang Mario unbelieving. "How?"

"I'll tell you all about it when I see you. My mother also wants to meet you and Father Randy. Would you call him for me?"

"Of course! But when are you leaving for Lauan?"

"Tomorrow night. Nanay promised I could see you and Father Randy before I left for the province."

"Then come by before lunch so we can hear all about your adventure and stay for dinner until you have to leave. Is there anyone else you want to see?"

"No. The only other people I know in Manila are Dolfo, Samboy, Benny, Bugoy and Mang Jun. I don't relish seeing them again." As he said those names, Tonyo felt they had been a part of a past that was so long ago.

Both Mang Mario and Father Randy were standing in front of the bakeshop, eager to see Tonyo again and meet this mother whose pull was so strong, her son had found her through thousands of miles and several obstacles. They all hugged each other mightily which brought tears to

Nanay's eyes. She hugged them both too and thanked them profusely for helping Tonyo find his way to her.

"So you're Tonyo's mother," said Mang Mario admiringly. "I must congratulate you for raising such a fine son. I must confess that I tried to make him stay and continue to work for me. I have never had such a hard worker. But I knew he would leave me sooner or later anyway to try and find you." Nanay beamed as Mang Mario said all this.

"Finding you became Tonyo's crusade," added Father Randy, "and we're all so glad he got back in one piece." Then the smiling priest turned to the young man in front of him and exclaimed, "My, how you've changed Tonyo! You're as tall as I am, and is that a slight mustache above your lip?"

Tonyo hopped into the kitchen and the bakers and kitchen helpers who had known him came up to pat his back and ruffle his hair which was almost immediately filled with flour. They asked if he was coming to work with them again. "I don't think so," answered Tonyo as he tried to fluff the flour out. "I have to finish school first, and ..."

"Tonyo," called Mang Mario, "we're going up to the house to eat. I prepared us a sumptuous lunch."

Over lunch, Tonyo updated both men on what had transpired when he had left the bakery. Mang Mario interrupted once in a while to exclaim, "*Diyos ko po*," Father Randy looked up to heaven and mumbled what sounded like giving thanks and crossed himself several times. Nanay kept a handkerchief to her eyes as Tonyo recounted his ordeal.

"I certainly will ask God to bless Jimmy and Lorna," offered the priest. "By the way, I think one of your friends 'passed by' the parish. I can't be too sure as the only description I have is yours, but I think it was Benny. He stayed one night and was gone before I could talk to him. Only God knows what happened to him."

The visit with Mang Mario and Father Randy ended too soon. As the baker had generously offered, it had extended to dinner. From the taxi on the way to the port, Tonyo kept an eye out for any of the three street boys. What would he do if he saw them? Would he yell at them from the taxi? *Hi! How have you guys been? Or, how was jail guys?*

While his mother paid the taxi driver, Tonyo looked around the port for their boat. There she was, the *MV Doña Corazon*, her rust-flaked hull being loaded with cargo and waiting for passengers to fill her up. It seemed life never

changed here. Was it about a year ago that he and Nanang Maria had come down that same boat? He signaled for his mother to go ahead. He would take care of all the baggage that had filled the taxi to bursting.

Unlike the boat ride to Manila, this time, Tonyo found himself in first class. Their cabin had two beds instead of bunks and although the sheets were a bit threadbare, they were comfortable enough. They also had their own bathroom. It was old but clean. Best of all, it was air-conditioned. But instead of enjoying the trip, Tonyo stayed in the cabin most of the time, especially as they got closer to home. He was not looking forward to seeing his father, and from the way his mother looked, she wasn't either. In Hong Kong, she talked of nothing but going home and seeing her children, father and husband again, whom she thought of every single day since she left Lauan.

Had she decided what to do with Tatay? Over dinner with Mang Mario and Father Randy, Nanay had talked about Tatay. This surprised Tonyo as his mother never spoke about her problems, much less to people she had just met. It was probably Father Randy's serene presence that pushed her to unburden herself. It helped that she had finally begun to think of what she was going to do once she got home. All that activity preparing to go

home allowed Nanay to put this serious problem in the back of her head much in the same she used to tuck old socks in the far end of the drawer only to take them out much later for darning.

They had told no one of their arrival. Nanay said she didn't want anyone to go out of his way to pick them up. Besides, it would be no problem to hire a *jeepney* that could take all their baggage. Was this part of her plan? Tonyo wondered. He still didn't know what to do. Nanay sat in front with the driver while Tonyo rode behind, making sure none of the bags or boxes bounced off the *jeepney*. They were going at a pretty fast clip through dusty and bumpy roads. It was always like this in the summer. Some things never changed. The *jeepney* driver tried to make conversation. He had asked her immediately if she was a *balikhayan*. Nanay tried to discourage him by giving monosyllabic answers and looking at the road straight ahead. Tonyo could see from the *jeepney's* side mirror that her face had taken on a stony look. He knew what she was thinking. But as soon as they reached the village perimeter and she began to see familiar faces, her smile returned and she waved enthusiastically at everyone she saw. Many of them pointed at Tonyo and waved to him too. Tonyo gave them his widest smile and waved back with a proud flick of his wrists.

By the time the *jeepney* stopped in front of their house, everyone was lined up outside including Tatay who seemed to have just jumped out of bed. His eyes were red and bleary, his hair unwashed and in total disarray and he had not shaven for days. Tonyo didn't need to smell the liquor to know his father had just woken from a drunken sleep.

The sight of her husband drove Nanay to lash out at him immediately. It was only him she saw. She totally ignored Ryan, Melody, Neneng and Lolo Carding as well as some of the other neighbors, who quickly disappeared like termites into the wood. She pummeled him with her fists and called him many names including that of a worthless cockroach and an over-staying devil. Lolo Carding and the children immediately surrounded her and took her away into the house. Only then did she see them. She hugged them and cried, blubbering on about how she missed them and she was so glad to see them again and how she had brought so many things for them and how could she have loved that horrible man.

Tonyo didn't follow his mother and the rest of his family into the house. He stayed outside with his father, who had turned into a limp and shriveled bundle of flesh, like *petchay* leaves left out too long on the market table. All the anger he

had for his father had transformed into pity. As if sensing he was not alone, Tatay lifted his eyes from the ground and looked at Tonyo.

What Tonyo saw in them broke his heart. In that instant, everything his father had done was forgiven. He rushed to his father and hugged him. A bawl, much like that of a hurt child, rose from his father and frightened Tonyo. He felt the weight of his father. It pressed upon his chest. But he didn't let go. He held on tighter and waited for the cries to subside.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The seed for this story was a short article in a newspaper about a boy in Mexico who had traveled several thousand miles from his village to Mexico City to find his mother. I knew what sort of story this could lead to and immediately set it down on paper and worked on it over several months until it was finished. This story just poured out, as if Tonyo were right beside me recounting everything that had happened to him.

The Overseas Contract Workers (OCWs) or Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) are a Philippine phenomenon. They have been called the new Filipino heroes, and rightly so, as the money they have sent home has helped prop up the economy time and time again. More importantly, they have improved the lives of their families with many of them being able to send their children to school and on to college. There are about 3,000,000 Filipino workers all over the world, 160,000 of whom are in Hong Kong. Most OCW's are women and, like Tonyo's mother, are professionals who have not been able to find decent jobs in their own country. Because of this diaspora, many families have come undone, those suffering the most being the children. This is a sad reality of the OCW.

Hopefully, with the help of the government, our OCW's can come home to stay, to enjoy their families and their hard-earned prosperity.

Carla M. Pacis
Mandaluyong,
January, 2000

TEACHERS' GUIDE

Dear Teachers,

This book contains several controversial issues that came up as the book evolved. You may or may not want to discuss them with your students. These issues of contemporary interest are domestic violence and physical abuse, alcoholism, streetchildren and street gangs, child labor (even if in this case, it is for a good cause), drug addiction and pushing and lastly, illegal entry.

I have formulated some questions and activities and divided these by subject in order to aid you in your discussions.

Carla M. Pacis

...RELIGION AND CHRISTIAN LIFE
EDUCATION

1. The break-up of Tonyo's family is a common occurrence among OCW families. Why is this so? Can these same reasons apply to non-OCW families as well? Why or why not?
2. What would have happened had Tonyo stayed at home and not left to find his mother?
3. In Manila, Tonyo hooks up with a gang of streetchildren. Ask your students if they know what street children are as opposed to orphans. How can the problem of street children be solved?
4. In Manila, Tonyo finds a job in Mang Mario's bakeshop. Is it right for Tonyo to work? Discuss the Rights of Children.
5. Bugoy, Samboy and Benny not only steal but sell and take drugs. What is drug addiction? How does it happen and how can it be avoided?

...SOCIAL STUDIES

1. Most families in the Philippines have a relative who lives abroad. Ask your class to write their story. Ask questions like: Why did they/he/she have to leave the Philippines? Why did they choose to go to where they are now? Do they like living there? Why? If not, why not?
2. Have your class list the pros and cons of being an OCW. They may have to do some research.
3. What contributions have the OCW's made to our country? Should the government continue to encourage the "export of people"? What can the government do to keep their citizens from migrating or from looking for jobs abroad?

...GEOGRAPHY

1. On the world map, have your students indicate which countries are host to Filipino OCW's.
2. Have your students calculate the miles Tonyo traveled from his hometown in Antique to his mother in Hong Kong. What if Mrs. Peralta were in Rome, Italy or New York, U.S.A.?
3. Have your students imagine they had to leave the Philippines to work abroad. What country would they go to? Why? What country would they not go to? Why not?
4. Discuss the geography, history, language, customs and culture of Hong Kong.

...LANGUAGE AND READING

1. Have your class change the plot of this story and have them think of different ways by which Tonyo could have found his mother.
2. Would they have ended the story the same way?
3. Have your students write a letter to you regarding their first trip abroad.

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